

“How To Change, Part 2”
Colossians 3:1-17

March 9, 2014

SI: Paul has finished his attack on all the ideas and teachings going around the Colossian church that each claimed to have the key to fullness in the Christian life.

He has shown them that all of those things are gimmicks.

None of them really make you a better Christian because they marginalize Jesus. They become the focus instead of him, but all fullness is found only in him.

So in this passage, Paul explains how you do change and experience fullness through your union with Christ.

We're going to spend three weeks on this passage, studying a few verses at a time.

INTRO: Dr. Harry Ironside was a famous evangelist and pastor, died in 1951. His ministry was first in California—San Francisco and Los Angeles, and then later he became pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago.

He was once street preaching in San Francisco when a man in the crowd handed him a business card with a note on the back.

Dr. Ironside recognized the name. A provocative speaker, communist agitator.

The note on the back that said:

I challenge you to debate with me the question ‘Agnosticism vs. Christianity’ in the Academy of Science Hall next Sunday afternoon at four o’clock. I will pay all expenses.

Ironside read it aloud to the crowd and then said:

I will debate you providing you agree to my conditions.

You must bring with you to the debate two people, a man and a woman, who I am going to now describe.

First, you must promise to bring one man who was for years what we commonly call a ‘down-and-outer.’ I’m not particular as to the exact nature of the sins that wrecked his life and made him an outcast from society whether he was a drunkard, or a criminal of some kind of a victim of any sensual appetite. He must be, however, a man who for years was under the power of some evil habits from which he could not deliver himself, but who, on some occasion, attended one of your meetings and heard you speak glorifying agnosticism and denouncing the Bible and Christianity, and whose heart and mind as he listened to such an address were so deeply stirred that he went away from that meeting saying, ‘Henceforth I, too, am an agnostic!’ or words to that effect, and as a result of embracing that particular philosophy he found that a new power had come into his life. The sins that he once loved, now he hates, and righteousness and goodness are henceforth the ideals of his life. He is now an entirely new man, a credit to himself and an asset to society all because he is an agnostic.

Secondly, you must bring to the hall next Sunday one woman who was once a poor, wretched outcast, the slave of degrading passions and the victim of man’s corrupt living . . . perhaps one who had lived for years down there on Pacific Street, or in some other hell-hole, utterly lost, ruined, and wretched. But this woman also entered one of your meetings and heard you loudly proclaiming your agnosticism and ridiculing the message of the Holy Scriptures. And as she listened to you, hope was born in her heart and she said, ‘This is just what I need to deliver me from slavery!’ She followed your teaching, became an intelligent agnostic. As a result, her whole being revolted against the degradation of the life she had been living. She fled from the infamous place where she had been captive so long and today, rehabilitated, she has won her way back to an honored position in society and is living a clean, virtuous, happy life all because she is an agnostic.

If you bring those two people, I will meet you for a debate.

And I will bring with me 100 men and women like I have described whose lives have been changed by believing the good news of Jesus Christ that you ridicule.

One of the great things about the Christian life is that you can change.

Not just superficial changes, not just changes of image or behavior—
but true changes from the inside out—changes of affections, changes of character.
And this change has nothing to do with special new teachings or practices.
It has everything to do with being united to Jesus Christ.

His life in you and your life in him and the power and patterns for living
that flow from that mystical union.

As noted last week, in this passage, Paul explains how Christians change.

According to him, it's a threefold process. Not three steps.

Not three separate actions, but a unified, threefold process.

We can separate this process into three components in order to study it—
and that's what we've been doing.

But don't forget that in practice, this an inter-related, all or nothing process.

What are the three components?

First, there is a motivating component, an animating or empowering component.

Paul calls it, in vs. 1 and 2, setting your heart on things above,
and setting your minds on things above where Christ is.

It's envisioning our union with Christ in his death, resurrection, ascension, and
second coming—all the great and invisible spiritual realities drive imaginations.
That's what we studied last week.

Second, there is a negative component, a putting off, a taking off.

Theologians call it the mortification of sin. To mortify something is to kill it.

Vs. 5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.

Vs. 8 Rid yourselves of all such things. Vs. 9 You have taken off your old self.

Third, there is a positive component, a putting on of virtue and goodness.

Theologians call vivification, which is a fancy word for bringing to life.

Vs. 9 Put on the new self which is being renewed.

Vs. 12 Clothe yourself with compassion. Vs. 14 Put on love.

This morning we're going to focus on the negative component of change—
this thing Paul calls putting off, taking off, putting to death.

Will look at it under two big headings:

1. The doctrine of mortification
2. The practice of mortification

MP#1 The doctrine of mortification

The term “mortification” is not in the Bible, it’s a term theologians have coined.

There are lots of theological words and phrases that are not in the Bible, but they are helpful shorthand for talking about what the Bible teaches.

Trinity, incarnation, “personal relationship with Jesus Christ”—

none of those are in the Bible, but they help summarize what the Bible teaches.

Mortification is a word that has fallen out of use among Christians.

In different times of church history, you would have heard Christians using it, but 21st century American Christians don’t use it much—and that’s too bad.

So what is mortification? The word itself simply means to put something to death. I’m going to give you the most concise definition I could come up with.

Then we’re going elaborate on it. Here’s the definition:

Mortification is the inclination a born again person has to fight sin in his or her life, so that its strength is weakened and its dominion destroyed.

When you are born again, a new nature is implanted in you by the Holy Spirit.

It’s the divine life, it is your human nature restored and renewed in Christ.

And with that new nature comes all sorts of new inclinations or dispositions.

You think differently about yourself and God and the world.

You have different judgments, you value different things, you behave differently.

These are all aspects of your new nature in Christ.

Now, it would have been nice, when we were born again, if God would have

delivered us completely from every last vestige of sin in our lives—but he didn’t.

He delivered us completely from the guilt and penalty of sin.

We are totally forgiven of all sins—past, present, and future.

The penalty was paid by Christ’s painful and shameful death on the cross.

But even though God completely delivered us from the guilt and penalty of sin,

he didn’t completely deliver us from the presence of sin in our lives.

Instead, he broke the power of sin to rule us

and he implanted in us an inclination to fight against the sin that remains.

So as regenerate people we see sin remaining in our lives, but we don’t like it,

we don’t want to think those things or do those things—so we start to fight it.

And over a lifetime, the remaining strength of sin is weakened

and its dominion over you is broken.

It’s killed. It’s mortified.

So that is God's process for making us holy and happy people.

He delivers us from the guilt and penalty of sin.

He breaks the power of sin to rule us completely.

He implants a new nature that is inclined to fight against remaining sin—and that's what we do throughout this life until we die and go to heaven.

To be a Christian is to be a person who fights sin in your life.

If you don't have the disposition and inclination to fight sin, then you aren't born again—it's as simple as that.

But—and this is a big but—

Even though mortification is part of our new nature in Christ,

it doesn't always feel natural and it is very often so hard to do, that we don't want to do it and we do a very poor job at it.

So God has to tell us to do it. And we have to make ourselves do it.

Imagine joining the army in a time of national crisis. Your country threatened.

You sign on the dotted line, you take oaths, you swear allegiance.

You go through training with your comrades—your band of brothers.

There is born in you a strong inclination to take the fight to the enemy.

Nothing seems more right and natural than to throw self into battle for country.

This is who you are now—you're a soldier. This is what you do—you fight.

And then you find yourself in a real battle.

You're crouched in a foxhole and the bullets are flying overhead.

Suddenly it doesn't seem natural to take the fight to the enemy.

The very last thing you want to do is raise up out of that cocoon of safety—even though it's really not safe. If you stay in foxhole you will die.

You have to advance, not just for yourself but for your country and your cause.

So your captain has to tell you, has to command you—up, forward, fight.

And you have to make yourself to it.

In this passage are a number of commands like that. Paul tells Colossians:

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.”

And Paul doesn't leave them wondering what sort of things he is talking about:

sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Paul says, kill those things. Put them to death.

The Colossians already knew those things weren't consistent with life in Christ.

They were a church of people who had come out of paganism.

That was how they all used to live before they knew Christ.

No doubt, in the early days of their faith, they never thought those old sinful ways would be attractive to them again, but they were.

They felt like a comfortable cocoon—comfortable but a place of death.

And then Paul gives the command: “Rid yourselves of all such things as these:”

Once again, he doesn’t leave them wondering what sorts of things: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

And then Paul says it again in another way:

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices.

This is one of Paul’s favorite images in talking about mortification—

taking off your old self. In Ephesians he says: Take off the old self.

Here he tells the Colossians:

Don’t lie to each other since you have taken off your old self.

In other words: Don’t go back. Don’t put on what you have taken off.

Once a drunk woman threw up on Allison’s back—

and as soon as Allison was able to do so, she took off her shirt and threw it away.

Even though she liked the shirt and could have washed it—it grossed her out.

But imagine putting that shirt back on with the vomit still on it.

I like the old shirt. I look good in this shirt. Smells a little funky . . .

You have taken off the old self and its practices—don’t put them on again.

God has to tell us that, even though we know it. We have to make ourselves do it.

Mortification is an inclination of the regenerate life, but it almost never feels natural or easy to fight sin, especially our old, favorite, comfortable sins.

At first glance, this might seem a negative or depressing doctrine—but it’s not.

It’s remarkably encouraging if you look at it in the right way.

Just look again at the list of sins that Paul tells the Colossians to put away:

Paul mentions those things because people in the church were doing them.

My goodness, sounds like an awful church, our church! But it was a great church.

Remember what he said about them in his salutation?

I thank God the Father for you because I have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven.

The reason Paul could say that, is because the Colossians were fighting sin.

They weren’t perfect, none of us are. They had embarrassing and painful failures.

We all do. But if you are cultivating your born-again inclination to fight sin, then, God be praised, sin is being weakened and its dominion destroyed.

And that brings us face to face with the question: How do we do it?

MP#2 The practice of mortification

I'm going to tell you how, but I need to preface this with two things.

First, remember the problem in the Colossian church—

all sorts of Christian fads that promised fullness in the Christian life—go on this special diet, keep these holy days, attend this exclusive in-depth Bible study, communicate with angels and you'll be on the fast track to spiritual maturity.

Paul says, Those are bogus. There is no fast track.

The way forward in the Christian life, the way you got into it.

The way to fullness is faith in Jesus Christ, repentance of your sins.

By the same token, there is no fast track or silver bullet for mortification.

If someone says: The secret to overcoming sin in your life is just doing this—this book, conference, Bible teacher, practice, ritual—don't waste your time.

The practice of mortification is not easy or fast—it's hard and takes a lifetime.

Keep that in mind as we go over these practices.

Second, the 17th century English Puritans probably thought more deeply and

biblically about this subject than Christians at any other time in church history.

Almost everything worthwhile that has been written on mortification in the last 300 years stands on the shoulders of the Puritans.

All the practical points I am going to make were first made by various Puritans in their exposition of the Bible's teaching. Six practices.

1. Remind yourself of your identity in Christ.

How does Paul start this section?

We studied it last Sunday—the motivational component—verses 1-4.

It's all about your union with Christ. Your mystical connection with him so that you share in the benefits of his death, resurrection, ascension, return.

You died with him—so you're done with guilt.

You were raised with him—so his divine life is in you.

You ascended with him—so you have the commendation of the Father.

You will participate in his return—on that day your true status will be revealed.

Remember those realities? That's who you are in Christ.

Remind yourself of that at all times, but especially when you are tempted.

This is who I am—no longer the old man, but the new man.

I've been delivered from the dominion of sin, so I'm now free to fight the remains of it in my heart, bring it to mind and use it as a weapon.

Not positive thinking—realities that you can act upon.

2. Remind yourself of the sinfulness of sin.

After listing all the old ways the Colossians are to put off, Paul says:

Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

In other words, people go to hell because of these things.

The motivation is not: I better quit doing these or God might send me to hell.

No. I have to quit doing these things because God can't send me to hell.

I've been delivered from hell.

I've been saved from the coming wrath by the precious death of Jesus for me.

How can someone who has been delivered from that wrath treat sin so lightly?

How can I continue to sin against such a great salvation?

If I continue to sin, I'm even worse than an unbeliever.

An unbeliever sins against God the Lawgiver and Judge.

But when I sin, it's against my heavenly Father and my Savior Jesus.

Preach these to yourself: Who you are in Christ, the sinfulness of sin.

3. Call the sins in your life what they really are.

Call a spade a spade. Paul gives us the proper terminology.

Call it sexual immorality, not "I made a mistake."

Call it impurity, not self-medication.

Call it lust and evil desires, not fantasies.

Call it greed and idolatry, not messed up priorities.

Call anger, rage, and malice, not an Irish temper, or letting off steam.

Call it filthy language, not just joking.

Call it lying, not sensitivity.

In your self-talk, call it what it is, and especially when you are talking to others.

Paul Tripp says:

Don't tell someone: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that.

Tell them: Please forgive me for saying exactly what was in my heart.

That ties in with the next practice.

4. Lean on trusted Christian brothers and sisters.

One author I read said: Mortification is collaborative.

Private prayer and Bible reading is essential, but if they are your only weapons against the old man, you will sometimes be outgunned.

Paul doesn't address this here in Colossians, but he does in Galatians 6.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.

Paul doesn't mean, if someone is caught red-handed, he means if anyone is trapped, mired in the quicksand of sin. Sooner or later we all get entangled, and sometimes we can't get untangled unless we confess our sin to a brother.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* he says that a person alone with his sin could privately repent and confess to God over and over, year after year, but sin would never weaken its grip because it thrives on isolation, pride, self-deception. You can confess sins in private to God and stay isolated, preserve your pride, deceive yourself that you are really serious about dealing with this thing.

Bonhoeffer says: What breaks isolation, pride, self-deception?

Confession to another Christian. It's something that we must sometimes do.

Now the last two I'm going to mention are favorites of the Puritans in the sense that they like elaborating on Paul's metaphor of putting the old self/man to death. How do you kill the old man who is still living in your house? Mention just two.

5. Starve him to death.

He's an old man. Don't feed him and he'll get weaker and weaker, eventually die.

No matter how much he begs, close your ears to mercy and ignore him.

At the most basic level this simply means that the more victories you have, the more times you resist particular temptations, the more sin's grip loosened.

When you indulge in a sin, you feed it.

But it goes deeper than that. It starts in the mind.

That's where the old self is nourished.

Imaginations, jealousies, resentments, self-pity, lusts.

The world offers plenty of things to feed those thoughts—stay away from them.

The things you allow into your mind, what you read, what you watch, they are never neutral, they feed something.

If you were on a serious diet, had to lose weight, you would be keenly aware of everything you put in your mouth. You would avoid having snacks in pantry.

You would distract yourself from hunger. Treat mortification with same care.

6. Strangle him, suffocate him. He's an old man.

Get fingers around his throat, put a pillow over his face.

You strangle and suffocate him with good and beautiful things.

Remember I said this is a three-fold, interrelated process?

Here we are bleeding over into the third component, the positive one.

You can't kill sin in your life by just saying no, just not feeding it.

That never works by itself. There has to be something in its place.

Here's how Dr. Rayburn put it:

There is always this double motion in the Bible's teaching of the Christian life: off and on . . . never one without the other, always both together . . . The wise will tell you that the truest way to kill sexual lust is truly to love one's wife or husband; the most effective way to kill

covetousness is to learn to find fulfillment and pleasure in the practice of generosity; the most effective way of removing anger from one's heart and speech is to crowd it out with the enthusiastic practice of love and forgiveness. The best way to force sins out of your life is to crowd them out with behaviors that are their opposite.

What is the opposite, positive virtue and behavior of that sin you are fighting?

Figure that out, start doing it, and strangle the old man.

What do you want to change about yourself?

Uncontrolled emotions

worry, depression, fear

afraid of certain people, certain situations

anger, bitterness, hard heart, not tender toward people you love

Uncontrolled tongue

say too much or too little, can't keep secrets, can't keep promises

hypocrite—say one thing, live another

Personal weaknesses

too shy, too self-conscious, wish could be more open, more appealing

wish was able to be closer to people

start things and never finish, too uptight, nothing you do ever good enough

Misuse of people and things

money problems—too stingy, not careful enough

time problems—not enough, too much, misused, schedule controls

wrong priorities, work too much, ignore, take for granted people.

You can change.

Not just superficial changes, not just changes of image or behavior—

but true changes from the inside out—changes of affections, changes of character.

It takes serious attention to mortification—and that is hard work.

The Puritan John Owen.

“There is no safety against sin but constant warfare.”

That sounds daunting, constant warfare.

“When sin lets us alone, we may let sin alone.”

There will be a day when sin lets us alone. That will be wonderful.

Until that day, continue to fight the good fight.