



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Living Like Dead People

Colossians 3.1-11

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Introduction

I once heard a speaker tell about a president who, after his inauguration, gathered his staff around his empty desk in the oval office, looked at all of them, and then impishly asked, “Now, what do we do?” I’ve not been able to otherwise document the story, but it’s not hard to imagine it or something like it taking place. In the nature of the case, *being* the President is different from being *elected* President. And much of it is a learn-as-you-go job.

The story reminds me that life presents us with many “now, what do we do?” moments. That Paul understood this is evident from the number of times he used the word “therefore” (οὖν; *oun*) or a synonym of it, either to advance an argument or to introduce the section of practical application of the doctrinal teaching that formed the first part of a letter (cf. Col 3.1, 5, 12; also Rom 12.1; Eph 4.1).

In Colossians, the practical application extends from 3.1 through 4.6. In this study, we’ll focus on the foundation he lays for what follows, seen in his declaration of the general principle and presentation of specific behaviors that should not characterize Christ’s followers (3.1-11).

A Call to Die

Twice in our text, Paul describes the life of the believer in terms of dying. In both cases, he refers back to his description of the change believers have made from old life to new (2.11-13). In 3.3, the fact that we have “died” at a definite point in time¹ is sufficient reason for a different life direction and behavior outcome. In 3.5, he is more specific and emphatic: “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you.”² N. T. Wright notes that, “literally, the phrase could be translated ‘the members (or “limbs”) which are upon the earth’; Paul probably intends this as a vivid metaphor.”³

It is important to see that the command to “put to death,” and especially the word “death,” points to a sharp break with the past, with no hint of compromise with “what is earthly in you” (v. 5). Wright says it well and elaborates on the implications for living:

Practices such as these are like a gangrenous limb to the eyes of a surgeon: they must be cut off before they infect the whole person.... You must cut off its lines of supply: it is futile and self-deceiving to bemoan one's inability to resist the last stage of a temptation when earlier stages have gone by unnoticed, or even eagerly welcomed (Wright, 134-135).

Focusing in particular on the principle's application to the volatile behaviors mentioned in verse 8, he adds, "When a tide of passion or a surge of anger is felt, it must be dealt with as the alien intruder it really is, and turned out of the house as having no right to be there at all" (Wright, 137). The fact that we cannot stop lustful, angry, or hateful thoughts from occurring to us does not mean that we cannot deal with them firmly to keep them from festering and degenerating into something else.

Thus, we must guard against generalizing the strong figures Paul uses and letting ourselves off the hook for failures. Paul is direct, specific, and blunt, calling out by name sins that are often softened with euphemisms. He is also comprehensive, as we see when we examine the specific behaviors he identifies.

Four Areas Where We Should Die

Sexual Sins (vv. 5-7)

- "Sexual immorality" (πορνεία; *porneia*): any intercourse outside of marriage.
- "Impurity" (ἀκαθαρσία; *akatharsia*): the contamination of character brought about by immoral behavior.
- "Passion" (πάθος; *pathos*): this term could refer to any desire that overwhelms and masters, but here, as it regularly does, it probably indicates uncontrolled sexual urges.
- "Evil desire" (from ἐπιθυμία; *epithumia* / κακός; *kakos*): desire, which in itself is neutral, is here described as "evil." Thus it refers to the state that logically precedes lust; the idea is not that the temptation is the sin, but that it should not be cherished or nurtured lest it degenerate into sin (cf. Jas 1.14-15).
- "Covetousness" (πλεονεξία; *pleonexia*): referring to the attitude of heart that lies behind evil desire (cf. Exod 20.17), the word as used here is best taken as "unchecked hunger for physical pleasure" (Wright, 134).
 - Notice that Paul says covetousness "is idolatry" (εἰδωλολατρία; *eidōlōlatreia*): "All such greed [covetousness] places at the centre of one's attention and devotion that which is not God" (Wright, 134).

Anger Sins (v. 8)

- "Anger" (ὀργή; *orgē*): the continuous state of smoldering or seething hatred.
- "Wrath" (θυμός; *thumos*): the anger that breaks out into actual angry deeds or words.
- "Malice" (κακία; *kakia*): the word basically means and is often translated "evil," but here is probably used in the sense of evil that is designed to hurt.
- "Slander" (βλασφημία; *blasphēmia*): speech that puts malice into practical effect; the word typically refers to that which dishonors God, calling to mind the reality that when we revile another human, we are reviling one made in God's image.
- "Obscene talk" (αἰσχρολογία; *aischrologia*): words that, either by their foul association or abusive intent, contaminate both speaker and hearers.

Sins of Integrity (vv. 9-10)

- “Do not lie to one another.” “Truth is often inconvenient, untidy or embarrassing, and we are constantly tempted to bend it into a less awkward shape” (Wright, 137).
- At the root of the problems, which are themselves distortions of what should be (in manipulation of or anger at people, or twisting of facts), the tendency to compromise the truth (a more likely prospect for many Christians than an outright lie) is a distortion of our humanity, not the way things are supposed to be

Sins of prejudice (v. 11)

All these terms relate to divisions that were considered very important in the ancient world which, like the modern world, “was an elaborate network of prejudice, suspicion, and arrogance, so ingrained as to be thought natural and normal” (Wright, 140).

- “Greek” (Ἕλλην; *Hellēn*): the dominant civilization, so someone who was a Greek, wherever he lived, thought himself a member of a privileged group.⁴
- “Jew” (Ἰουδαῖος; *Ioudaios*): conscious of God’s election and the law’s moral superiority, many tended to devalue and even despise people of other cultures.
- “Barbarian” (βάρβαρος; *barbaros*): a contemptuous word used by the Greeks for any who did not speak their language.
- “Scythians” (Σκύθης; *Skuthēs*): from little known northern parts of Asia, they were extreme examples of barbarians
- “Slave” (δούλος; *doulos*) and “free” (ἐλεύθερος; *eleutheros*): with the same kinds of prejudices seen in modern times (and continuing among the different peoples involved even after slavery’s demise).

Solution: A New Way of Thinking

At different places throughout these lists of sins, Paul reminds the Colossians of what they needed to rectify the situation. First, he pointed out that sexual and anger sins came about because of a way of “walking” that developed into a habitual way of life (see v. 7, which looks back to vv. 5-6, but also sets the stage for v. 8).

Second, in a similar way, he told them the integrity issue would be solved as they remembered that they had been called to a new life (vv. 9, 10).

Finally, prejudice would be overcome when they recalled that the identities and attitudes at the root of the problem are matters that are irrelevant in Christ. The differences do not disappear, but they cease to matter when we see people from God’s point of view (v. 11). As Wright wrote, “Nobody must allow prejudices from their pre-Christian days to distort the new humanity which God has created in and through the New Man” (Wright, 141).

It’s vital to see that all these solutions are in fact *reminders* of ideas he introduced in the statement of principle in verses 1-4, one involving three ideas: they had not “changed religions,” but had “died” and been “raised with Christ” (vv. 1, 3). Because they had not internalized that truth, their focus and aim had not changed from the earthly way to view people and things to the heavenly way (v. 2). Thus, they were not yet fully realizing the nature and benefits of his glorious life, having failed to appreciate that the new age has begun and that they were to live in view of that reality.

Conclusion

N. T. Wright's summary captures the main idea Paul pursues in our text:

Every Christian has the responsibility, before God, to investigate the lifelines of whatever sins are defeating him personally, and to cut them off without pity. Better that than have them eventually destroy him (Wright, 135).

In place of our sins and the habits that result, every Christian is called to seek the life of Jesus, to ask what he would do in the most complete and far-reaching sense of that question. As our priorities focus on his way, our walk will be different. That is what we are to do.

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Notes

¹ Paul used the aorist indicative plural form of ἀποθνῆσκω (*apothnēskō*) in verse 3.

² He used the aorist imperative plural form of νεκρόω (*nekroō*) in verse 5.

³ N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 134. Note these alternate translations: "Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth" (ASV); and "Therefore, treat the parts of your earthly body as dead" (NASB).

⁴ "... somewhat like those who speak a major European language in much of the modern world" (Wright, 139).