

Christ Is All, and in All

Colossians 3:5-11

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September 13, 2026

Good morning. It's so good to see all of you here this morning. If you don't know, my name is Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and it's my privilege to get to open up God's Word with you this morning. This morning, we're going to continue in our study of Paul's letter to the Colossians. And last week, Penny walked us through chapter 3, verses 1-4, and he gave us a picture of who we are, that we're no longer hidden from Christ in our sinful alienation, but now, through faith, we're hidden with Christ instead. In fact, He's our very life, and because we're hidden with Christ now, one day when He appears in glory, we too will appear in glory with Him. And it's in light of that incredible hope that Paul picks up one verse later, and so I invite you to turn to Colossians chapter 3. We're going to look at verses 5-11. It says this,

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Oh, Heavenly Father, we bow before you with grateful hearts. You take care of us. You have given us your word to teach us about who you are, what you have done on behalf of sinners, and what you call us to. And we are grateful for that. We thank you for this letter. We thank you for Paul's faithfulness, and his wisdom. And we ask, Lord, that you will continue to teach us through it, by your Spirit. Open our eyes and our ears to what you would have us learn. Help us, Lord, this morning. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight. Oh, Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, so many of you know, I started cycling a couple of years ago. And I was recently introduced to a word I hesitate to admit applies to me now - *Mamil*. Not the four-legged kind, but M-A-M-I-L. It's an acronym. It means “Middle-Aged Man In Lycra.” How's that for a defeating descriptor? Apparently, now that I don the spandex, that's me. Just one more *mamil* testing your patience on our beloved Roanoke roads. But here's the thing about cycling clothing. It's perfect for a Saturday morning climb, or a quick out and back on the greenway, but it's useless. And my wife and kids would say downright inappropriate for anything after. Which means it needs to come off fast. The problem is, it doesn't want to. More than once, I've stood in our bedroom, sweaty and out of breath, wrestling my way out of my jersey, wondering why something that went on so easily an hour or two ago won't come off now.

Of course, it always does, but it definitely involves some grunting. Maybe cycling's not your thing, but I'd bet most of us have experience with clothing that clings right when it's time to move on to whatever's next. Maybe it's snow boots you have to hop on one foot to get off, or maybe it's a sweater you get stuck halfway over your head every time. But whatever the

specific item is, we can always get it off eventually if we wrestle long enough. But there's a harder kind of change in clothes, and Paul's been building toward it since the beginning of this letter. In fact, all the way back in chapter 1, Paul said something remarkable. He said we've been "rescued from the domain of darkness and moved into the kingdom of God's own Son." We've been transferred. We've been moved to an entirely new country, one that dresses differently than the old one did. And the problem is we're still wearing our old clothes. We're foreign transplants who don't look the part yet. And I think this is a helpful analogy for understanding where Paul's picking up this morning.

And so he begins with a command in verse 5, "put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you." Now after all we've heard since the beginning of this letter, the raising, the hiding, the assurance of promised glory just last week, it almost sounds like he's changing the subject, but he's not. "Putting to death" is where getting dressed for our new country actually begins. But what actually counts for earthly? Well, Paul names the old wardrobe item by item: "Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." It's an uncomfortable list. And our English translation actually undersells it a bit. Behind what is earthly in you is a more specific word, "members", "limbs." It's the same word Paul uses elsewhere for the body of Christ, where we're described as members of one another. That's not distant language. It's the language of our own body. And Paul knew this battle personally. He confesses it himself in Romans 7: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin." This isn't a doctrine Paul's deduced from a distance. It's a fight he's lived.

Now, none of this means the body itself is what's under attack here. Paul isn't at war with his own members as such. He's only at war with the vices using them. And four of these move together almost as one thought. You can call it a cluster of sins of desire: An act, then the residue it leaves, then the current underneath, then the wanting before it's aimed at anything. It's almost like he's tracing a current down to its source. And it reminds me of what James said in chapter 1 of his letter: "Desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and sin, once it's grown up, gives birth to death." Paul isn't interested in managing a progression partway through. He wants it stopped before desire even finishes conceiving. And he's not ashamed about naming that current "sexual" as often as he does. Not because this is the only shape desire's corruption takes, but because it's here that using someone and loving someone are easiest to confuse. What we do with our bodies, with someone else's body, either loves them or uses them. There's nothing really in between.

It's no wonder that Paul returns to this list or a list similar to it, writing to the Galatians, the Romans, his young protégé Timothy, city after city, letter after letter. Whatever was pressing on Colossae, this isn't just a Colossian problem. It's the shape evil desire takes, everywhere it's left. But putting it to death is harder than admitting it's there. Centuries after Paul, Augustine prayed with a kind of honesty most of us reserve for no one, not even ourselves: "Give me chastity, Lord. But not yet." It's a strange prayer to say out loud, but the feeling behind it isn't strange at all. I imagine most of us have prayed some version of that, about something we know we should let go, but aren't ready to yet. There's a fifth item in the list we haven't mentioned yet. It's the one under all the others, I think: "Covetousness, which is idolatry." The first four all show up somewhere specific, in a body, an act, a particular hunger. This one covers everything. It's not another item on the list so much as what's driving the other four. The desire for more, whatever the more turns out to be, no matter how much of it we get.

And the thing is, covetousness rarely feels dangerous. Instead it feels like practicality. A little more put away, a little more security, or it feels like ambition. The next raise, the bigger house. I don't know what it looks like in your life, but I guess most of us can recognize it in ourselves if we're honest. And yet that's exactly the problem. We're not honest with ourselves. We give it a nicer name instead. And when it goes too far, we're more likely to joke about it than confessing it. Being too practical or too ambitious are among those acceptable sins. The kind we laugh off at dinner, not the kind we bring to prayer. We think of them as character flaws. Mildly embarrassing, maybe, but not really sin. But Paul doesn't diagnose covetousness as a character flaw. He calls it idolatry. Whatever we're certain would finally be enough, that's our God, whether we'd use the word.

And idolatry, after all, is just devotion aimed at the wrong thing. You see, devotion is itself a kind of marriage, which makes misdirected devotion a kind of infidelity. Hosea's life and ministry, all of it prove the point. And Paul, calling this covetousness idolatry, is standing shoulder to shoulder with him. And yet that's not all idolatry does. It shapes what we become. Reminds me of a scene in C.S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. A boy named Eustace Scrub falls asleep on a dead dragon's treasure with his mind devoted entirely to it. What it could buy him, how much it would finally make of him. And he wakes up a dragon, remember? His covetousness didn't just describe what he did, it remade what he was. We become like whatever we worship, which is exactly why it matters so much what or who that is. Friends, all of this, the wanting that never stays satisfied, the worship aimed at the wrong thing, the being made into whatever we've bowed down to, all of this is still just what it looks like to keep wearing clothes that don't belong on us anymore.

And if we stay dressed like this, Paul tells us in verse 6 what comes next: "On account of these, the wrath of God is coming." It's not someday in the abstract, but as a settled verdict of judgment. And that's hard to hear. But the New Testament scholar Charles Cranfield says something worth holding on to. He says this: "Rightly understood, God's wrath is an expression of his goodness, not its opposite. A God who felt nothing at injustice or corruption wouldn't be good, he'd simply be indifferent." So there are two things that are true here at once. This warning carries real weight. Staying dressed in these desires really does lead where Paul says it leads, and we need to hear this. And yet we also need to hear that this warning comes from a God whose character we can trust, not one prone to cruelty, but one whose opposition to sin flows from the very goodness that has already raised us with Christ and hidden our life with him. And Paul says as much himself in the both times, this isn't who we are anymore.

But wanting like this rarely stops with what it does to us alone. It shapes how we treat others as well. And so what Paul turns to next isn't desire anymore, it's disunity. Look with me at verse 8. He says this, "but now you must put them all away. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth." Five things this time, and every one of them a way disunity shows up between us. But notice too that Paul's changed the verb. A moment ago it was "put to death," it was killing language, but here "it's put away." The New Testament scholar Scott McKnight offers a picture worth remembering, an old stained shirt worn through at the collar that we finally throw out instead of washing one more time. We don't kill a shirt like that, we just stop wearing it. And yet we're often slower to take this list, this second vice list, as seriously as the last one. Our obscenities get excused as a slip of the tongue. Our short tempers, they barely count as sin at all. But Paul doesn't rank them that way. To him, a bitter, unforgiving heart is no lighter a sin than a lustful one. "Put away" carries the same weight as put to death. Yeah, the verb has changed, but the weight hasn't.

And here's what each one actually looks like. Anger is what we feel. Wrath is what that feeling becomes once we act on it. Malice is wanting someone else to get hurt, and if we're honest, malice rarely stays with us alone. It recruits, drawing others in. And once malice does this, it starts to talk. And Paul names two kinds of talk, slander and obscene talk. Now, neither of these really are about the words themselves. Slander is *blasphemia* in the Greek. It's the same word scripture uses elsewhere for blasphemy against God himself. We never think of ourselves as blasphemers, but tearing down someone made in God's image over coffee, in a text thread, in a version of a story we tell each other on a drive home, these things are as close to the same act that scripture uses the same word for them. And obscene talk. Obscene talk isn't just crude language the way we, I think, we tend to hear it. Paul's point here is that it's speech that degrades. It cuts someone down to size quick and in the moment. Slander does this with a story built around the truth, usually, but obscene talk, it doesn't need one.

But there's one more thing on Paul's mind, and he gives it a sentence all his own. He says, "do not lie to one another" in verse 9. Unlike everything before it, this command names who gets hurt. It's not a general just corrosion of the church. He says, "do not lie to one another." Why does he put it that way? Well, in Ephesians 4:25, he tells us, "Put away falsehood, speak the truth, because we are members of one another." There's that word again, "members." The same one Paul told us to put to death back in verse 5. And it's doing double duty here. There, it named the vices we had to kill. Here, it names the people we're called to protect by refusing to lie to the person next to us. Anger and slander wound the people they're aimed at. A lie does something worse. It poisons the ground everyone else is standing on, too, replacing whatever trust was holding this place together with suspicion instead. A community can absorb a lot, but it cannot survive on that.

Leviticus 19 already said this centuries ago. Centuries before Paul had ever wrote to the Colossians. It said, "You shall not lie to one another." God's people have never been permitted to build a community on anything but the truth. Now, we've moved slowly through this list, one word at a time, and it would be easy to hear all of it and think the answer is simply to try harder. And when I think about what that kind of effort would actually take, I'm reminded of a movie I love, *The Shawshank Redemption*. It's about a man named Andy Dufresne, a banker wrongly convicted of a double murder, sentenced to two life terms for something he didn't do. Near the film's climax, we watch him escape, crawling to freedom through a sewage pipe, 500 yards of foulness, the movie says, none of us wants to imagine. He comes up out of a creek in the middle of a thunderstorm, arms lifted, lightning turning the rain white as it pours over him, and what's easy to miss is what he's been dragging behind him, a bag sealed in plastic against the filth, so that by the morning he isn't just free, he's someone else entirely, right down to a sleek suit, shined shoes, and even a new name already prepared and waiting.

For me, it's one of the most beautiful portrayals of redemption, of leaving behind the old filth and beginning anew in modern cinema. But here's the thing, all of it, the tunnel he dug out of his cell, the new identity he spent years building, he did it all. It was Andy, alone, from start to finish. And this raises a question worth asking, *is that the kind of effort Paul's asking of us here? Years of solitary work, digging and building ourselves free, one inch at a time?* Friends, the answer is simple, no, not even partly. You see, Andy was innocent and more than capable of digging his own way out, but we're neither. Paul tells us that apart from Christ, we're not struggling to escape. We're dead in our trespasses and sins. We're still following the prince of the power of the air, bound to a master we can't leave on our own. And what we

need instead is what the English poet John Donne prayed for. We need God to “batter our hearts.” We need him to divorce us from the enemy holding on to us. We need him to enslave us to himself so that we might finally be free from the filth. The gospel isn't a call to *solo bootstrappa* salvation. I've said it many times, it's not save yourself one effort at a time. It's a declaration of what God has done on your behalf. And here's the good news. Paul tells us it already has.

Take another look at the end of verse 9 along with verse 10, and notice what he says there. “Seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and put on the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge after the image of its creator.” Did you catch the shift? Up to this point Paul's only told us what to do. Put to death what is earthly in you. Put away anger and malice and every lie. All of these are commands, things we're still in the middle of. But here he says you have put off - You have put on. That's not one more thing being asked of us. It's Paul telling us something that's already true, even though sometimes it might not feel like it within the struggle. He isn't waiting for us to finish changing. He's telling us we already have. In fact, he says so plainly to the Corinthians, if anyone is in Christ, he's what? A new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.

And yet that's not the whole picture. Paul adds that we're also being renewed. Unlike putting off and putting on, which happened once and are finished, renewal is still happening. But this isn't just our own work. Writing to Titus, Paul uses the same word, renewal, and says it's the Holy Spirit doing it in us. He says the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. And this is why Paul can say writing to the Philippians, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his own good pleasure. God works first. That's the only reason any of this is possible at all. He works first, then we work, not instead of him, but because of him. And this is where everything he's already told us to do this morning fits in. Putting to death, putting away, none of that is separate from renewal. It's what the Spirit's work actually looks like in us. And friends, this is slow work, all of it, I know. And it doesn't always feel like progress while it's happening. We're still growing into what we already are, and some seasons, some seasons, it looks like there's real change. We catch the anger before acting on it. We hold our tongue before we slander. But other seasons, it feels like nothing's moved.

And yet Paul doesn't measure renewal by how it feels. He just tells us it's happening in us, whether we can see it yet or not. The Spirit's still at work, even on the days when we can't feel it. And yet none of this, the putting to death, the putting away, the slow work of renewal, is just about getting free of old clothes for their own sake. Look again at verse 10. Paul tells us that “the new self we've put on is being renewed after the image of its creator.” That word *image*, it comes straight from Genesis. “In the beginning, God made us in his own image, after his likeness.” That's who we were built to be, but it's not who we've been, not fully. And everything we've been told to put to death this morning, everything we've been told to put away, is, is proof of that. But it is who Christ already is. Think back to how Paul opened this letter. Christ, he said, is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. Firstborn. Christ was never meant to bear that image alone. Others were always meant to follow him into it. And that's exactly what's happening in us right now.

We're being remade, renewed after his image, a little more each day to look like him. But this renewal, this renewal isn't just an individual experience. That image, that likeness is a new humanity. One that doesn't dissolve our individuality, but weaves us together into one people. Which is exactly why Paul brings this whole section to its conclusion in verse 11, with an

emphasis on that unity. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all. That's a loaded list, right down to Scythian. Every one of those categories was a way people used to sort each other in Paul's day. Who counted? Who didn't? Who ought to be despised for this or that reason? And you know, if we're honest, we still draw the same circles today with the tribes we choose, with the people we cancel. But here's the thing, Paul doesn't explain those distinctions or rank them. He simply ends them. Not Greek or Jew, not slave or free. None of it has any place among the people of God. Why? Because Christ is all and in all.

And a chapter later in this very letter, we see Paul putting this into action. He tells the Colossians in chapter 4, he's sending them Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, he calls him. One of you, he says. Onesimus' legal status under Rome as a slave hadn't changed, but to Paul, he wasn't a slave anymore. He was a brother. Friends, that's a remarkable thing for Paul to have done. Could we do the same? I guess most of us already have someone in mind, someone we've decided is beneath us, we refuse to talk to, or maybe we talk about. Paul once had someone like that too. What changed wasn't Paul's effort. It was that for Paul, Christ really was all and in all, and his grace left no one beneath - anyone. Only then could he put off the old way of seeing Onesimus, a slave, someone beneath him, and put on the new - a brother. And whatever tensions used to keep you apart, maybe from the person next to you, or someone in this room, or someone else you're thinking of, or maybe they still do. Christ is who holds all of us together now, the same way he held Paul and Onesimus together, and I'm reminded of those words from one of my favorite hymns, "The Church is One Foundation:"

*Elect from every nation,
yet one over all the earth,
her charter of salvation,
one Lord, one faith, one birth.
One holy name she blesses,
partakes one holy food,
and to one hope she presses,
with every grace endued.*

Samuel Stone wrote those words in 1866, and he's saying the same thing this whole sermon has been trying to say. One Lord we're all being remade to look like, and one birth for every one of us. And this is why in a few moments we're gonna share the same bread, and the same cup, the same meal for every one of us, and we'll leave this table the same way we came to it, still growing into what we already are. Christ is all, and in all. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we bow before you once again. We thank you for your word. We ask that you use your word in our lives. Give us your grace, by your Spirit, to put away, to put to death the things that are unlike you, the things that bring shame upon your name. Help us to rest in our Savior, knowing that we have been clothed in him. We pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.