

**Series:** Colossians

**Title:** “One of the Most Serious Sins”

**Text:** Colossians 3:5-7

**Date:** November 5, 2023

### **Verse 5**

After urging his believers to live with a heavenly-ward perspective, Paul exhorted them to flee from sin. He said, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5). The sin Paul had in view was not just any sin. His words centered on one of the most serious of all sins — sexual sin. While all sin is the same in that all sin is a violation of God’s Law (James 2:10-11), all sin is not the same in the damage it inflicts on one’s soul and the souls of others. Paul rationalized concerning these things when writing to the church at Corinth, a church that was plagued by sexual sin: “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18). The incident with Sodom and Gomorrah stands as a historical testament to the fact that sexual sin carries more grave consequences than other sins (Genesis 19:1-29).

### *“Put to Death”*

In instructing his readers on the topic of sexual sin, Paul told them to “put” such sin “to death.” In doing so, he used “death” as a metaphor for the Christian activity of renouncing sin. He used other metaphors for such activity in the New Testament — “lay aside” (Colossians 3:8) and “put off” (Ephesians 4:22). The concept of “death” may seem to be a strong and severe concept to use as a metaphor for the believer’s war against sin. However, the concept is a fitting one since sin demands a strong response. Believers should remember that Jesus called for a severe stance toward indwelling sin. He told his disciples, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell” (Matthew 5:29-30).

Both Paul and Jesus called for serious and drastic action toward sexual sin.

Seriousness is needed since sexual sin threatens one’s soul. Concerning these things, one has said, “...sin is not something to which we can afford to be indifferent — not merely because it is unacceptable to God, but because it is destructive of all that it means for us to be truly man.”<sup>1</sup> Drastic action is required because of the drastic consequences of sexual sin. All sin is sin in that it violates God’s Law, but not all sin is the same in reference to consequences. God has built extra societal shame, stigma, and suffering into sexual sin because of the beauty, joy, and blessed purposes of sexual intimacy within the marriage covenant (Genesis 1:28).

Because of these things, believers must not toy with sexual sin. They must kill it. In similar fashion to his words in Colossians 3:5, Paul told the Romans: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). The Puritans often referred to these things as “the mortification of sin.” John Owen wrote a treatise on the subject entitled “On the Mortification of Sin.”

The question believers face is, “How can one mortify sin?” Putting sin “to death” involves faith in the fact that one is already dead to sin in Christ (Colossians 2:20). It also involves a commitment to employ the Lord’s means of grace for resisting indwelling sin (Psalm 119:11). In addition, one must take serious action to avoid sin, erecting boundaries to protect oneself from such sin. One has said, “To put something to death you must cut off its lines of supply: it is futile and self-deceiving to bemoan one’s ability to resist the last stage of

---

<sup>1</sup> Johnston, Mark G. *Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 93.

temptation when earlier stages have gone by unnoticed, or even eagerly welcome.”<sup>2</sup> Such insight reveals what is involved with the mortification of sin. Not only does one employ the means of grace to kill evil desire, but one erects boundaries and safeguards to insulate and protect against temptation. Paul commended such activity elsewhere in the New Testament saying, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:14). Solomon encouraged his son to employ such safeguards in fighting sin, saying, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23).

It is important to note that mortification involves human commitment and responsibility but it is ultimately dependent on the power of Christ. This is true, since no human power can effectively subdue indwelling sin. Fleshly instruments are not capable of renewing human flesh. The Christian who puts sin to death indeed commits to “work out” his or her salvation (Philippians 2:12), but he or she recognizes all along that “it is God who works in” the believer to subdue sin and produce the character of Christ (Philippians 2:13).

In putting sin to death, believers must realize that sin will never be fully vanquished until Christ makes all things new. One Puritan commented on this reality, saying, “...the regenerate themselves never attain such perfect mortification in this life, but that they must always strive to mortify themselves more and more.”<sup>3</sup> There will be no perfection until the resurrection, but God’s people are to always strive after perfection and holiness (1 Peter 1:16; Hebrews 12:14). The anticipation of a future eradication of sin should encourage believers regarding the mortification of sin. John discussed these realities, saying, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

#### “Therefore”

The word “therefore” linked Paul’s words in Colossians 3:5 to what he said in Colossians 3:1-4, drawing a conclusion concerning the gospel truth he spoke of in those earlier verses. Paul similarly used the word “therefore” to draw a conclusion in his teaching back in Colossians 3:1. In our current text, the word gave the basis for Paul’s teaching on sexual sin. Furthermore, it revealed that one’s power to fight against sexual sin comes through the realities of the gospel and the power of the cross. Believers can kill sexual sin in their lives because the power of sin has been broken through the cross of Christ.

#### “What is Earthly in You”

In the original language of the New Testament, Paul’s Greek word for “in you” was one that was used of human body parts and extremities. Perhaps the apostle provided an allusion to the way human body parts are often employed in sexual sin. The human body has natural God-given desires that are corrupted by sin. These desires emanate from the various body parts or “members” of the human body. Because of the principle of sin within fallen humanity, humankind often seeks to fulfill such desires in ungodly ways. John spoke of such things when he spoke of “the lust of the flesh” (1 John 2:16). Believers are called to resist and reject the promptings of their fallen bodies through the power of Christ and his Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 24).

The word “earthly” referred to that which was temporal and transitory. It referred to that which was from below, belonging to the sphere of the world that has been marked by sin. Sexual sin comes from below, from the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31). Satan loves sexual sin because it perverts something beautiful that the Lord designed for marital bliss and gospel

---

<sup>2</sup> Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 135.

<sup>3</sup> Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians, Volume 2*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 36.

propagation. In addition, he hates human sexuality because it is related to the child bearing process that the Lord used to send Satan's vanquisher to Earth — Jesus Christ (Genesis 3:15).

That which is "earthly" is opposed to that which is "from above." In battling sexual sin, Paul's readers needed to discern what was from the Earth and what belonged to Eternity. The apostle had just alluded to such things, saying, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2). The depraved, immoral sexual practices of some in Colossae were to be discerned as being from Earth, not from "above."

#### *"Sexual Immorality, Impurity, Passion, Evil Desire, and Covetousness"*

The word for "sexual immorality" referred "to any intercourse outside of marriage."<sup>4</sup> Acts like adultery, fornication, homosexuality, bestiality, pornography, perversions of sex between married couples, pornography, self-gratification, and pedophilia could all be included underneath the title "sexual immorality." God outlawed sexual sin in his Moral Law (Exodus 20:14). Jesus affirmed the witness of God's Law concerning such matters in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:27-30). "Sexual immorality" is any sexual interaction or behavior that deviates from the Lord's standard, the Lord's design, and the Lord's plan. In his divine pattern, sexual intimacy is something to be enjoyed between a man and a wife within the context of a covenant marriage relationships.

Many err in their defense of sexual sin, minimizing certain acts of sexual impurity. They defend certain sins like homosexuality and transgenderism, claiming that Scripture doesn't explicitly speak against them. The problem with such a rationale is that it overlooks the Lord's original intent for sex. Human sexuality is to be defined by the Creator's divine parameters. The Lord has ordained for sex to be something special between a man and woman who are bound together in marriage. Such is made clear from both the Genesis account of the first marriage (Genesis 2:24-25) and through Jesus' affirmation of that account (Matthew 19:4-6). God's statements about sex and marriage define the boundaries for sexual intimacy, not humanity's lust.

The word "impurity" was used of uncleanness and filthiness of any sort in Paul's days.<sup>5</sup> Used in a moral sense by Paul, it spoke to the way sexual sin contaminates one's moral and spiritual character.<sup>6</sup> The Greek word for "covetousness" could have been rendered "greed." It spoke of an insatiable selfish desire.<sup>7</sup> In regard to sexual sin, the term alluded to "unchecked hunger for physical pleasure, which is the breeding-ground for more specific evil desires."<sup>8</sup>

One could regard the terms "impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness" as all referring to the sinful and sensual passions and urges that serve as the source for the aforementioned "sexual immorality." The problem nowadays with sexual sin is that many believe these urges justify their engagement in sexual sin. In his letter, James was clear that none can excuse their sin on the basis of desire. He said, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death" (James 1:13-15). One may sense an urge to engage in a sexual act that goes against God's Law, but such an urge does not justify sin. God's people are called to fight against the promptings of sin through the power of Christ.

---

<sup>4</sup> Wright, 134.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 466.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 466.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, 134.

### *“Which Is Idolatry”*

Paul similarly likened sexual “covetousness” to idolatry when writing to the Ephesians. In his letter to that church, he said, “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Ephesians 5:5). Why would Paul call sexual covetousness “idolatry?” A couple of realities should be noted. First, the worship of false gods in the ancient world often involved illicit sexual activities.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, sexual immorality was often regarded as synonymous with idolatry. Second, sexual sin can be regarded as idolatry because of the way many look to it for a fulfillment and joy that can only be found in God. Idolatry is the act of elevating a person, place, or thing to a position of supreme importance above God. Those who engage in sexual sin often disregard God’s Law and regard illicit sexual activity as the source of true contentment; thus, they commit idolatry.

### **Verse 6**

After calling his readers to kill sexual sin, Paul spoke of God’s judgment on such sin: “On account of these the wrath of God is coming” (Colossians 3:6). The phrase “on account of these” referred back to the sins Paul listed in verse 5 — “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness.” The apostle wanted his reader to know that God has special judgment reserved for sexual sin. The Lord plans to judge sexual sin in a severe manner because of the way it rebels against his divine design for humankind, because of the way it rebels against his plan for marriage, and because of the way it strikes against the very gospel message (Genesis 2:24-25; Ephesians 5:25-28). Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul highlighted the Lord’s judgment against sexual sin (Galatians 5:19-21).

### *“Wrath”*

It is important to note that God’s wrath and judgment toward sin will not be the arbitrary, off-the-cuff, capricious, and peevishly vengeful rage of annoyed God who has uncontrolled anger toward sin.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the Lord’s end-of-the-world wrath on sin will involve the righteous justice of a holy God. The Lord hates sin because of the way it sullied his original and beautiful intent for creation. His wrath on sin in the last days will be a holy way that he restores creation to its original intent. It will also be a means by which he vindicates his holiness. Augustine once said, “The anger of God is not the perturbation of an excited mind, but the tranquil constitution of righteous judgment.”<sup>11</sup>

### *“Is Coming”*

In speaking about the coming of the Lord’s judgment, Paul used what is known as a futuristic present tense verb. Such verbiage depicted the certainty of God’s wrath on sin. It portrayed God’s future wrath as already being poured out. One Puritan described the meaning of Paul’s words by saying, “However the children of unbelief flatter themselves, they cannot avoid the Divine wrath; for wrath now cometh upon them, and in coming it will come, and not tarry.”<sup>12</sup> Though many may doubt it and deny it, the future wrath of God on human sin is certain.

According to Scripture, the Lord has a special type of judgment for sexual sin. The author of Hebrews made reference to such realities, saying, “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” (Hebrews 13:4). Paul’s warning concerning God’s wrath on sexual sin is an

---

<sup>9</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 466.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Davenant, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Davenant, 59.

important one in every generation, especially in a modern age given over to depravity related to pornography, adultery, lust, teenage fornication, senior adult fornication, homosexuality, transgenderism, and sext messaging.

### **Verse 7**

In concluding his discussion on sexual sin, Paul reminded his readers that such sin belonged to their pre-Christian way of living. He said, “In these you too once walked, when you were living in them” (Colossians 3:7). The apostle’s intent in verse 7 was to remind his readers of their pre-Christian lifestyle in order to prove the folly of returning to sexual sin. To accomplish his intent, he used two concepts to talk about his readers pre-conversion lifestyle — “walked” and “living.”

#### *“You Too Once Walked”*

The word rendered “walked” was a popular one in the New Testament. It spoke of one’s lifestyle (Galatians 5:16, 25; Ephesians 4:1). Paul used the term earlier in Colossians 1:10 and 2:6. Walking is a good metaphor for one’s lifestyle since walking is something one does every day. In addition, walking is something that touches every aspect of one’s life.

In using the metaphor of walking in Colossians 3:7, Paul meant to speak of the pre-conversion lifestyle of some of his readers. Apparently, Paul knew that some at Colossae had previously lived lives that were marked by great sexual immorality. However, their lives had been transformed by the grace of Jesus. Because of the metamorphosis they had experienced in conversion, God’s people should be averse to returning to sins of unregenerate humanity. Paul used similar logic and rationale elsewhere in the New Testament. He appealed to the Ephesians to avoid certain sins by saying, “...in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2:2-3)..

#### *“When You Were Living in Them”*

The concept of “living” was, as one has said, “more fundamental for Paul.”<sup>13</sup> One’s “living” is broader than one’s “walk.” The Greek word for “living” is the Greek word from which we get our word “zoo.” In Paul’s day, it spoke of how one passed his or her life.<sup>14</sup> Whereas the word for “walked” referred to one’s lifestyle, highlighting actions and deeds that marked such a lifestyle, the word for “living” spoke to the overall tenor and direction of one’s life. It referred to the source of one’s walk, the origin of one’s lifestyle and mode of living. One’s “living” is the fount from which all thoughts, behavior, actions, and speech flow. Prior to conversion, the believers at Colossae passed their existence “living” according to the whims and ways of the flesh (Romans 8:12-13). Having been born again, they were called to pass their existence according to the realities of Christ (Romans 6:10-11; 8:13; Galatians 2:19; 5:25).

---

<sup>13</sup> Wright, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), [CD-Rom].