

Put off Flesh, Put on Christ: Colossians 3:5–16

Colossians 3:5-16 Overview

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, chapter 3 starts off with a call to put on a new self. Paul charges the Colossians to put aside their heresy, and outright immorality, and put on the love and compassion of Christ. Chapter 3, (Col 3:1-17, NASB) is often separated out into three practical parts. First, Paul speaks to those seeking spiritual values (v 1-4), second, he calls us to take off the sins of our old life (v 5-11), and finally, we are to put on the virtuous life of Christ (v 12-17). In our focus here (v 5-16), Paul moves into verses 5-9 and puts forth an argument that is intended to fight the Colossians Gnosticism. Their Gnostic claim was that the body is seen as evil, and as such, is not able to be redeemed, and therefore one might as well live however one chooses to live. Paul quickly warns that these things will lead to God’s wrath (v. 6), and by some indications, this has already come (the present tense of “is coming”, *erchetai*, is used perhaps to indicated God’s wrath is already upon us).¹

As Paul moves forward in his rebuke of their behavior he moves into the second section, the call to live the virtuous life of Christ. He uses a reference here to the Scythians, a nomadic tribe of “barbaric” people who were constantly at war (v. 11), and “probably [seen as] the most barbaric the world has ever known”.² Even through this type of heathen living, Paul exhorts that Christ is still working among them; “Christ is all,

¹ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, , *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 1st Edition, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1983), 681.

² J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, Vol. V, V vols. (Pasadena, CA: Thru the Bible Radio, 1983), 358.

and in all” (v. 11) and calls on the Colossians to put aside their differences, “bearing with” (v. 13) each other, and show the love, unity, and compassion that is available through faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul closes this section, he tells his audience to “let the word of Christ dwell within you” (v. 16), and for this, we should be eternally thankful in our hearts. The translation for “word” here is the Greek word *logos*, the same term John uses in his opening announcement in verse 1, saying, “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us”. (John 1:14) While the phrase “let dwell” is only found in the New Testament here in Colossians (v. 16), in both cases, the *logos*, the revelation of God, is something we are told to “dwell in” and “live on”. Scripture is something to be familiar with, to study, absorb, and digest, something that is to become life itself. A dwelling that permeates our heart and guides us in our life.³ Something Paul told the Colossians to be thankful for deep in their heart.

What Does this Text Mean, What are Paul’s Instructions?

This particular section of Colossians is one of the more practical sections of the book, having already left the more doctrinal parts in previous chapters, Paul very plainly and directly teaches us to leave the life of sin behind. Where some scripture leaves the reader questioning the motives and instructions of the writer, here Paul is quite clear. Prior to our conviction to follow Christ, we were living in unrepentant sin, sins of the flesh as Paul points out. Every vile and degrading lust is brought out and put squarely on the table before us. In a life prior to God’s grace, which covered our sin, these actions and lifestyles would have been acceptable to us, or at least, not offensive enough to make any serious adjustments in how we intended to live our life.

³ Thomas L. Constable, "Dr. Constable's Notes on Colossians," *Sonic Light*, 2007, <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/colossians.pdf> (accessed September 26, 2009), 43.

Once we claim Christ in our life, as the Colossians did, we may still contain the sin described by Paul, but we are called to a higher understanding (v. 12), and a more virtuous life found through following Christ’s teachings. Paul points out that since we are covered by God’s grace, we should not lie to each other (v. 9) but instead, love each other (v. 14) by letting God rule over everything in our life (v. 15). The call to a virtuous life in Christ is fulfilled in love. All other aspects of the life Paul, and ultimately Christ, are calling us to here come down to some offspring of love. Beloved, compassion, the heart, kindness, unity, peace, thankful, humility, gentleness, and patience are all listed among the virtues in this section of Colossians, and all are a call to love.

How Can One Do This, How Do I do This?

One of the most difficult aspects of being a Christian must be to take what is clearly shown to us in scripture and apply it to our life. From a worldview outside the church, we are seen as hypocritical because we do not do this in our daily lives. In *UnChristian*, Kinnaman’s research shows that 85% of young “outsiders” conclude present-day Christianity is hypocritical.⁴ Kinnaman concludes, “The most obvious reason [for this is] our lives don’t match our beliefs.”⁵ The outside world, no doubt, is eager to point out when a Christian fails. Often the outsider does not understand that claiming to being a Christian does not mean we will never fall into sin, and as such, fail our beliefs, but this does not exempt us from trying to live a virtuous life. We are not to choose the Gnostic alternative Paul spoke about in verse 5 merely because original sin places our body (the flesh) in a heretical nature of sin. Obviously this lifestyle cannot be

⁴ David Kinnaman, *UnChristian, What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why It Matters*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 41.

⁵ Ibid, 46.

lived out in our own power, but only if we put on the power and hope of Christ, in compassion, forgiveness, and ultimately, love.

In my own life, I continually try to examine those numerous immoral qualities I know still exist in my life, and constantly try to replace them with those found and displayed by Christ. As this walk continues in my own life, hopefully, it becomes more difficult to exhibit those sinful qualities. As Paul tells us to put on a “heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (v. 12), it becomes almost impossible to exhibit any of those qualities and “lie to one another” at the same time. As you put on one, you have to remove the other. It is an impossibility for someone to have malice intent and show Christ’s love at the same time, so if I put on Christ, I am forced to take off my old self, there is no other way. In the most practical sense, to put off the flesh is to throw away the sin in our life. To put on Christ, is to dwell constantly in the revelation, *logos*, letting the Love and Word of God rule in our heart.

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