

What to do with Sin

Text:

Colossians 3:5-11

“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.”

Introduction:

In the last study I pointed out that Paul had a very clear idea of what it meant to live in Christ, and that this is not the only passage where he presents his vision of the Christian life. We saw that we can summarize his teaching as follows:

- To know Christ is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and to have new life
- This new life is the basis of the Christian life, but it must be cultivated
- Although we have new life in Christ we have not yet been completely delivered from the old life so we must consciously put off all that is sinful and pertains to the old life
- We must at the same time consciously put on the virtues that pertain to the new life, the life of Christ
- The new life especially manifests itself in the way we relate to others because ultimately it is a life of love since God is love, Christ came to manifest God’s love, and it is the life of Christ that is being formed in us

The rest of the teaching part of the letter to the Colossians will be occupied with an exhortation to this kind of life. It is characterized by four imperatives which were common to early Christian teaching. These exhortations are found at the head of the remaining four paragraphs and will provide the subjects for the next four studies. They are:

- “Put to death” (3:5,11), cf. also “put off” (3:8)
- “Put on” (3:12-17)
- “Be subject” (3:18-4:1)
- “Watch and pray” (4:2-6)

In taking up the exhortation to mortify, or put to death, that which is earthly we are expounding the third point of the summary given above that we must consciously put off that which is sinful and pertains to the old life. We are answering the question: “What shall we do with sin?” To help us organized our thoughts and to have a clear plan of action, we may organize what Paul has to say about this under two words. Sin must first be *recognized*, and then it must be *repudiated*.

I. The Recognition of Sin

One of Satan’s great lies is to convince us that sin is normal. We must remind ourselves that sin was not a part of God’s original creation, and then recognize it for the disruption of normal life that it is. As we pointed out in an earlier message, God created the world in a state of *shalom*, or harmonious peace, and sin is the disruption of that state. Sin creates nothing. Only God can create, and sin is the disruption and destruction of what God has created. This is what makes sin sin. It is a cancer in the healthy creation of God. It is dysfunction introduced into Gods original harmony. It is never glamorous, never positive, and never normal. It will be absent from the new creation which will be the ultimate end of the work of Christ that Paul has laid out for us in the first two chapters of this epistle.

Once we recognize sin for what it is; the disrupter of our peace and the cause of our sorrows—when we have once seen it for what it really is; our chief enemy, our only desire will be to be done with it. We will long for the coming of God’s Kingdom and the final setting right of all that is wrong. We must resist any temptation to glamorize sin, but recognize it for the poison that it is. The world may try to glamorize it but in the end, as Alvin Platinga writes “sin attracts us about as much as an unlubricated wheel bearing.” Think, for example, he says “of the aggressive irritability that fills unhappy households, the relentless aggressiveness that grinds on and on. Surliness, bureaucratic indifference, whining self-pity, sebaceous forms of gluttony, petty resentments and petty larceny—none of these dreary things quickens our pulse” (*Not the Way it’s Supposed to Be*, p. 92).

Once we have recognized the general destructiveness of sin and seen it for the disrupter of God’s *shalom* that it is, and once we have come to truly desire God’s peace that can only be

established through righteousness, then we must begin, not by trying to change the world, or those around us, but by consciously recognizing our own sins one by one and laying them aside. In so doing, we will, in a way that most likely will remain imperceptible to us, become God's instruments of peace and change in the world. It will be impossible for us however, to help others until we first take our own sin seriously. This is what Jesus meant when he said: "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (Matthew 7:3-5).

Notice that in this passage Paul does not speak of laying aside sin, but he gives us two long lists of sins to be laid aside, and then tells us to stop lying. What he is implying by this is that we must deal with specific sins one at a time. They must be acknowledged as sin. I have found that people have much less problem saying: "I am a sinner" (usually followed by "like everyone else"), than saying: "I am a liar", or "I am an adulterer".

If time permitted we would go through these lists. It is always helpful to think about individual sins. God uses this to awaken the conscience. But even if you could go through this entire list and check each one of and say: "I have conquered that one", it would not mean that you were finished with sin. The list is not comprehensive. It was probably especially appropriate for the Colossians. Since the devil is always finding new ways to pervert good, and he really doesn't care what sin he trips us up with, we must ever be on our guard to recognize new forms of sin. This is one of the main points that C. S. Lewis makes in *Screwtape Letters*. If a frontal attack doesn't work then Satan will sneak up behind us and find a way to pervert what we intend for good.

Most of our sins are ingrained patterns of behavior, habits that we have had so long we hardly recognize them unless they are called to our attention by someone else. When they are, our first reaction is to justify them. This is where we go wrong. Once the finger has been placed on the evil we should recognize it as such and consider it an act of grace that God has made us aware of it, because we cannot rid ourselves of what we do not recognize.

Not only must we recognize sin as the destructive parasite that it is, and recognize it in its specific manifestations in ourselves, but finally we must recognize it as aberrant to our new life in Christ and unnecessary. This is what Paul is getting at in the text when he says: "stop lying to one another (or whatever else the sin might be) seeing that you have put off the old man, and put on the new man which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator". Simply put, anything that doesn't look like Christ has no place in the Christian life, so stop

making excuses and be done with it. He gives his fullest explanation of why this is true in Romans 6:6-14 when he says:

“Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with *him*, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.”

Sin, he says, has no more right to rule over us. We are no longer slaves to sin. We are now possessed with the spiritual perception to recognize it for what it is and the spiritual power to refuse to obey it. If we were under its dominion outside of Christ, it is because we lacked these two things, but this is no longer the case, so to continue to live under its dominion is to refuse the enlightenment and power that have been accorded us by grace.

Practically speaking we are often in such a habit of saying “yes,” that we forget we can say “no”. Sin is so ingrained in us that we obey it blindly and unconsciously. Habits are only changed through conscious and deliberate effort, and sinful patterns of behavior are changed by recognizing them as such, realizing that they have no part in the new life in Christ, putting them aside, and replacing them with righteous behavior patterns.

II. The Repudiation of Sin

We have just seen the basis for the repudiation of sin. Christ through his death has broken the power of sin over us, and we, through our identification with him in faith, symbolized in our baptism, have been set free from the dominion of sin. We now have the right to say “no”.

I have on numerous occasions, usually while driving, found myself listening to something on the radio that I found intensely disagreeable. On these occasions the thought has come to me, almost like a revelation, “I don’t have to listen to this”. Upon coming to that realization, I did something very simple. I changed the station. When this has happened, without exception, I was listening almost unconsciously. I had been listening to something I wanted to hear; then the program had changed. I would then force myself to endure something disagreeable, until I woke up and realized that it was I who controlled the radio and not the radio that controlled

me. The hard part was the recognition. Once I realized I was in control the repudiation was as easy as turning a button. Now engrained patterns of sin may not be as easy to change as a radio station, but the illustration is applicable to what I am saying.

Paul uses two terms to tell us what to do with sin. First he says we should put it to death (verse 5). If I may use a rather morbid illustration, but let me say that we put it to death by starving it. Every time it clamors for our attention we say no, we refuse to feed it. Each time we refuse to feed it, it grows weaker, and eventually it dies completely. We recognize that it is dead when instead of being attractive it becomes, as all dead things, repulsive to us.

Secondly, Paul says that we should “put off” the “old man”. The image here is that of changing clothes. Next time we will take up the next step which is to “put on the new”, but we cannot put on the new over the old, like a bag lady that wears her entire wardrobe. The old will corrupt the new. Putting off sin then is as easy in one sense as changing clothes. Sometimes, however, we are like a stubborn person, who, although he has the means of doing it, refuses to buy new clothes or new shoes, and continues wearing the old ones long beyond their usefulness only to finally give in and buy new ones, and then wonder to himself why he waited so long. No one who has replaced a sinful pattern of behavior with godly behavior has ever regretted it, but many have wondered why they waited so long to do it. The biggest issue in the repudiation of sin is motivation. Once you recognize your sin, and the destructive effect that it is having on you and on those around you; once you recognize that it is contrary to the new life that you have received in Christ, you will be like a person who has worn his old clothes far too long, who takes a good look at himself in the mirror one morning and immediately heads for the nearest clothing store. The recognition is crucial. We must stop hiding from reality. Sin is ugly. That’s the bad news, but the good news is that it doesn’t have to be a permanent state. You can be rid of it. Sometimes it’s almost as easy as changing a radio station, or changing clothes.

There is much more in this text which needs to be explained, but this is an essential step in Christian growth: recognize sin as sin then recognize the power of Christ over sin, then exercise that authority by saying “no I am done with such behavior, I will not let sin rule over me.” You may be surprised how easy it is. Christ has already done the work.