

**“Heaven’s Model Home”**  
**Colossians 3:5-11**  
**November 6, 2016**

---

**INTRODUCTION:**

We sometimes misread the Bible by reading it through our own cultural lens. There’s a story told about two fish swimming along when an older fish swims past them and asks, “How’s the water, boys?” They give one another puzzled looks, swim a little further until one of them says, “What the heck is water?” We are swimming in the waters of individualism but don’t really see it for what it is because it is so ubiquitous. If we read today’s passage through the lens of American individualism, we fail to see Paul’s focus on the church as God’s new community. We read it simply as Paul’s teaching about how we can grow in personal holiness. Paul does talk about personal holiness here, but he sets it in the larger context of God’s purpose to build a new community of people who know Jesus and live in peace.

How do we know that this passage is about personal holiness for the sake of the church rather than for the sake just of the individual? There are two reasons. First, verse 11 is completely random if this passage is only about personal holiness. **“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”** The “here” Paul is talking about is the church. Second, when Paul moves in the next paragraph to speak about the positive qualities of holiness we are to put on, he applies them specifically to our life together in the church. We are to put on these positive qualities in order that we might bear with one another and forgive one another.

Paul is concerned about more than personal holiness. He is concerned about personal holiness among Christians because he sees the church as the model home of the coming kingdom. Just as the model home shows what the rest of the homes in the neighborhood will look like, even though they are yet to be built, the church is to show what heaven looks like. We make Jesus attractive by showing the alternative to the anger and divisiveness around us.

I guess you’ve heard that we have an election coming on Tuesday. It has been a difficult election season for most of us because it has revealed some significant cracks in the foundation of our nation. It seems that truth doesn’t matter so much anymore. Many have embraced the Nazi view of truth. The Nazis defined truth as whatever is to the advantage of your own people. One of our presidential candidates said that he would accept the outcome of the election only if he wins. In other words, if it turns out the way he wants it to, he will accept it as true. But if it goes the other way, he will regard it as false. A society cannot flourish when truth becomes so degraded. As Christians, we

desperately want to do something to be of help to our nation. What can we do? We can pursue holiness as a church, showing people what heaven is like and what Jesus is like by the quality of our community. And then we can welcome them to join us. Let's explore this more carefully.

## I. Community-Killing Sins

There are two lists of sins in this passage. The first list, found in verse 5, lists five sins in the ever-present categories of sex and money. The first four sins describe not only illicit sexual activity, but also the heart of lust where such activity begins. Paul includes in his list "sexual immorality" and "impurity," two words that would most commonly describe any sexual activity outside a committed marriage between a man and a woman. But he also includes "passion" and "evil desire," two words that describe what goes on in the heart rather than the body. The heart that flirts with someone just because it feels good to be wanted and desired has sinned.

Sexual sins hurt the whole church. When left unchecked, they spread like fire through dry grass. Or to use the metaphor the apostle Paul uses of the way sexual sin can spread, **"Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"** (1 Cor. 5:6). He's talking about the way yeast spreads a lump of dough, saying that sin spreads through a church in just the same way. I know of a PCA congregation where the founding pastor committed adultery and ran away with the church secretary, whom he eventually married. The third pastor of that church committed adultery, ending a thirty-year marriage in the process. Other church officers and their children also fell into adultery, and an unusually large number of marriages in that church ended in divorce.

Greed is the last sin in this list. The covetous heart wants what it doesn't have. The greedy heart is never satisfied in the present. It knows nothing of the beautiful quality of contentment. Paul says that covetousness has religious roots in idolatry. Money is a substitute god, promising power and control. Though greed may manifest itself in such outward sins as lying, stealing and economic injustice, it can also exist entirely in the heart. As such, it is often a respectable sin. There's an old proverb that says, "If a man is drunk with wine, we kick him out of the church; if he is drunk with money, we make him a deacon." Greed may not provoke a negative reaction among people, but it meets with quite a different response from God. **"On account of these the wrath of God is coming"** (v. 6). Sins in the area of sex and money bring God's judgment.

The second list of sins includes sins that are all in the category of speech. Once again, though, Paul lists both the overt sins of the tongue as well as the heart sins that lie at their root. He ends with the clear sin of lying, but begins with anger, a heart sin. Anger, the first in his list, is the heart attitude that

arises when self-trust reigns in the heart instead of trust in God. When we trust in ourselves, we always see ourselves as right and others as wrong, ourselves as victims and others as victimizers. When things don't work out as we think they should, the angry person has a ready explanation. It's always someone else's fault. When this anger spills out in our words or actions, it is called "wrath" or "malice," the next two sins in Paul's list. It can also lead to "slander" and "abusive talk" (not crude language).

These sins of the tongue bring great damage to the church. We can appreciate this more fully by recalling to mind how a family is affected by the presence of an angry person. Anger creates a toxic and pervasive cloud over the whole family. It is like there are explosive mines hidden throughout the house. You can't see them and you don't know what's going to set them off. But you definitely know it when one is triggered, because there is a blast that leaves widespread damage. It works the same way in the church. When anger is prevalent in a church, you can feel it in the air. It sucks all the oxygen out of the room and suffocates any life there. Paul says that such anger should be kept in the past. **"In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away"** (v. 7-8).

## II. Sin-Killing Community

While it is true that these sins destroy community, it is also true that community has an essential role in destroying these sins. There is an old saying that it takes a village to raise a child. It is also true that it takes a village to defeat sin. One of the reasons it takes a village is because of the continuing presence of strong sinful desires in the human heart, even in the hearts of God's people. Notice the language of verse 5: **"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you."** These sins are described as being within us. Why do we have such trouble with temptations to sexual sin, to sins of the tongue and to covetousness? We have trouble because we still want to sin. Paul said it like this in another place. **"For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do"** (Gal. 5:17). There is a battle raging inside every Christian. The Westminster Confession of Faith, in its chapter on sanctification, says it like this: "This sanctification is... imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh" (XIII, 3).

The reality of this internal warfare explains Paul's language about how we are to deal with these indwelling sins. He uses verbs that indicate decisive measures. We are to "put to death" and "put away" these sins. They are like enemies determined to kill us. It's either them or us, and so we are called not to stop short of death in fighting them. The verb to put away is used of

removing clothing. Both of these verbs reject any notion of incrementalism in our fight against sin. One doesn't half way remove clothes. If there is a poisonous snake loose in your house, it would be hard to relax until you saw the dead body of a decapitated snake in your trash can. You don't fight pornography by saying, "I indulged this sin for two hours yesterday. My plan is to cut that back by 15 minutes next month, and continue that reduction for seven months after that until I'm no longer viewing pornography."

Paul's call to us is to take drastic measures with our sin. Such measures are required because sin seems so natural to us. It feels good to sin, at least initially. I read a posting this week by Rosario Butterfield that said it well.

If this were 1999—the year that I was converted and walked away from the woman and lesbian community I loved—instead of 2016, Jen Hatmaker's words about the holiness of LGBT relationships would have flooded into my world like a balm of Gilead. How amazing it would have been to have someone as radiant, knowledgeable, humble, kind, and funny as Jen saying out loud what my heart was shouting: *Yes, I can have Jesus and my girlfriend. Yes, I can flourish both in my tenured academic discipline (queer theory and English literature and culture) and in my church...* Maybe I wouldn't need to lose everything to have Jesus. Maybe the gospel wouldn't ruin me while I waited, waited, waited for the Lord to build me back up after he convicted me of my sin, and I suffered the consequences. Maybe it would go differently for me than it did for Paul, Daniel, David, and Jeremiah. Maybe Jesus could save me without afflicting me. Maybe the Lord would give to me respectable crosses [and] manageable thorns.

But we are in fact called to die, to take up our cross. To take up a cross means that you are not coming back. It means that you are burning bridges with a past. This is precisely where our new community helps us. When we die to self in this way, we join a community of people who are doing the same. There is great power and encouragement in joining with others who are fighting the same enemy of sinful desires within. That's why Paul concludes this paragraph with a word about the church in verse 11. **"Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."**

This is God's new community, heaven's model home. Jesus becomes the center, and the old distinctions fade. There are no more racial barriers, such as between Greek and Jew, no more religious barriers, such as between circumcised and uncircumcised, no more cultural barriers such as barbarian and Scythian, and no more social barriers such as between slave and free. Why will these barriers all come down? Because there will be the kind of unity experienced when a baseball team that has experienced a 108 year drought finally wins the championship. The prize is finally won after long suffering together. In the church, we are suffering together as we fight alongside one another the power of indwelling sin. But we already have the prize of Jesus, who is sufficient for us.

### **III. Community-Building Knowledge**

How is it that we come together as a community and find Jesus to be everything? It happens as the new self which we are to put on is **“renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator”** (v. 10). We need constant renewal so that we look like Jesus, and this renewal requires knowledge. This knowledge is more relational than cognitive. It’s not just knowing some facts, but knowing a person. This knowing is the deep knowing of trust and love. It happens when we know the love of our Lord and trust his ways in our life. Jesus has loved us and died for us, and we have come to trust him for everything. Renewal happens as we love and trust Jesus enough to lose everything gladly in order to have him.

When I was a young teenager, I thought my parents were my biggest enemies. They would do such evil things as make me keep my hair shorter than I wanted and make me do many chores around the house. Now that I’m a little more mature than a 13 year old, I can see that no one on the planet loved me more than the two people I thought were my greatest enemies. That’s the kind of renewal of knowledge Paul is talking about here, coming to see that the God you thought was your greatest enemy loves you more than anyone in the universe.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Some of the most expensive residential real estate in the nation can be found in the Millennium Tower in San Francisco. Apartments in this 58 story building sold for \$2000 per square foot when it opened in 2009. Many sports celebrities and other famous people have taken up residence there. But then cracks began to develop throughout the building. Engineers have determined that the building has sunk 16 inches since it was completed. It is listing 14 inches at the top. What’s more, the sinking has not stopped, and no one knows when it will. Apparently, the building is too heavy for the foundation it is built upon, and now the lawsuits are starting to accumulate.

The same is true of our fallen world and our fallen lives. Cracks are developing in the foundation, and the whole thing will eventually collapse. But there is another building, one made by God, to which we can flee. It is the church Jesus came to establish. Anyone who wants can move into this building, and it costs nothing. And it is the community in which we join together in our fight against sin. This suggests an important application. Are you part of this community? I don’t mean do you show up every once in a while for a worship service? Rather, are you a part so that your relationship to the church is beginning to help you in your fight against sin?