

Right Ways to Master the Flesh (1)

Steve Lewis - www.SpiritAndTruth.org

(Colossians 3:1-10)

In the last session we saw how the apostle Paul described the *wrong* ways to gain mastery over our sin nature. In today's passage Paul will begin to explain the *right* ways to gain mastery over our sin nature. Why is it necessary for a believer in Christ to deal with the sin nature at all? Believers have a new spiritual nature that is capable of pleasing God, but we do not yet have our glorified bodies.

The old fleshly nature coexists with our new spiritual nature. In his earlier letter to the church in Rome, Paul described his own personal struggle with his old nature (Romans 7:18-23). Putting our trust in Christ for salvation does not eradicate the old fleshly nature. Our old nature still exerts a powerful pull toward old habit patterns developed through years of living apart from God. Those old habits and behavior patterns can only be overruled through the work of the new nature as it submits to the Holy Spirit and obeys the Word of God. In this section the apostle Paul will deal with the right way to master the fleshly nature.

Col 3:1 - Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

“**Therefore,**” since none of the worldly methods in chapter 2 have any value for mastering the flesh, you must seek help from a different direction. Paul introduced the pictures of *circumcision* and *baptism* (Col 2:11-13) which involve a believer's putting off the flesh and a public identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Paul now applies these pictures to the practical issue of how believers are to control the indulgence of the flesh. He said, “If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to its decrees?” (Col 2:20-21) There Paul pictured our death with Christ to show that we are no longer obligated to respond to fleshly desires as we did before. We now have the ability to overrule or countermand fleshly desires. Col 2:20 contained the first part of the sequence when it stated: “If you have died with Christ,” and here in Col 3:1 is the corresponding resurrection which completes the sequence.

As in Col 2:20, here Paul used a Greek “First Class Conditional Clause” when he said, “**if you have been raised up with Christ.**” Because we know that our resurrection to new life in Christ is an accomplished fact (Col 2:12-13), we could legitimately translate this, “**Since** you have been raised up with Christ.” The last part of this verse is possible only because this condition is in fact true. **Keep seeking** is a present active imperative in the second person plural, so Paul commands all of his readers to be continually or habitually seeking the things above.

The Greek word *zēteō* means “to diligently pursue something in order to obtain it.” What are these **things above**? We are to seek the things **where Christ is**, and Paul leaves no doubt about where Christ is right now. He reminds us that Christ is **seated at the right hand of God**

in heaven. Upon His ascension Christ sat down at the right hand of God: “So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.” (Mark 16:19)

How are we to keep seeking the things above? The Greek word **seeking** (*zēteō*) can also mean “to seek in order to find out by thinking.” In the next verse Paul says that this process involves the use of our mind for controlling our thought life.

Col 3:2 - Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

“**Set your mind**” (*phroneō*) has the basic meaning: “to think.” Paul is commanding them to continually keep on controlling their thoughts. One commentator has said, “You must not only *seek* heaven, you must *think* heaven.” Sometimes it may seem as if our thoughts have a mind of their own, or that thoughts arise over which we have no control. But that is not true. Our thoughts are not independent and uncontrollable. Thoughts can be resisted and replaced by deliberately refocusing attention on things above. Before a person’s salvation in Christ, not much thought was given to eternity or the things of God, and there was no enabling power to resist fleshly or worldly ideas. But now a believer is able to focus on things above rather than solely on earthly things. We can bring the priorities of heaven to our earthly lives, centering our focus on things that will matter for eternity.

Since Christ is seated at the right hand of God, He certainly has the power and authority to help with anything we encounter in our daily lives. Jesus is seated there because He defeated the forces of evil that would try to influence us to indulge our fleshly passions (Col 2:15). The fact that Paul commands us to do this assumes that it must be possible for a believer to do this. This does not mean that it will be easy. There may be times of struggle and failure, but there is forgiveness and restoration for the believer. The truth Paul presents here is that believers are responsible for managing their thought life. We must decide to do this, and this may involve overruling fleshly desires that are deeply ingrained in our lives.

Col 3:3 - For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

In this verse Paul tells believers that they are **dead** ... but **alive**. This may seem confusing or contradictory until we understand the specific sphere for both our death and our life. The reason for refusing to respond to fleshly desires is that we are *dead*, and a dead person no longer gives in to sin. Believers are “in the world” but no longer ruled by worldly passions. We must set our minds on things above where our life is hidden with Christ, rather than allowing earthly, fleshly thoughts to dominate our thinking. As believers we are no longer obligated to obey or be ruled by worldly thoughts and passions. Our position is in Christ, who is our source of true life. Since we have not yet been completely removed from the world, we must live in these fleshly bodies for a little while longer. But what really matters to us is hidden with Christ as He sits at God’s right hand.

The word **hidden** is the Greek word *kruptō* which means “to be kept securely out of sight.” First, our true life is kept secure in Christ. The other aspect of being **hidden** is that those around us in the world cannot see our new source of life. It is invisible to them, and they can’t see any reason

why we behave the way we do. As believers, most of the things that attract us and delight us belong to heaven rather than to earth. Our choices, values, and motives now come from a heavenly perspective rather than an earthly one.

Col 3:4 - When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Paul's main point is that **Christ is our life**. Christ is our Creator, our Redeemer, our Advocate, and the One who holds us together. He is the source of our new life, which gives us the desire and power to say "No" to fleshly indulgence and to follow His example in living a life that is pleasing to God.

This verse also contrasts with the previous verse. In verse 3 Paul described our present situation, where the source of our spiritual life is *hidden* from those in the world. Here verse 4 looks forward to that future time when Jesus comes for us and *reveals* believers in our glorified state. This brings up the question: When are believers glorified?

In one sense believers are already glorified. In His high-priestly prayer for His disciples before His crucifixion, Jesus said, "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them" (John 17:22). The apostle Paul affirmed this when he wrote to the church in Rome that believers are already glorified (Rom 8:30). Our glorification is an accomplished fact from God's perspective, but we are waiting for its *manifestation* on that day when Jesus appears and will bring us with Him to the Father's house where He has been preparing a place for us (John 14:3).

The reason we must receive our glorified bodies on that day is because, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (1 Cor 15:50). If we are to accompany Jesus to His Father's house, then we cannot do it without our glorified bodies. Paul added this explanation: "It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in **glory**; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body." (1 Cor 15:42-44) Having a glorified body is required for accompanying Christ to the place He has prepared for us in the presence of the Father.

When will this happen? In his letter to the Corinthians Paul revealed a mystery that had not been previously recorded in the Old Testament.¹ Paul provided new information about the resurrection of Church-age believers. At the moment when Jesus returns for His own there will be living believers who will be resurrected along with those Church-age saints who have already died. Paul says, "Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality." (1 Cor 15:51-53)

In another passage Paul said: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet

¹ The Old Testament did reveal that Old Testament saints would be resurrected (Dan 12:2).

the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.” (1 Thess 4:16-17) These passages refer to the resurrection of Church-age believers, known as the Rapture. This is the moment when Jesus will appear above the earth to gather the members of His body, the Church, and to remove them from the earth. The Church will depart with Christ to be with Him in the Father’s house. That is the moment in time when Church-age believers will receive their glorified bodies.

This is what Paul refers to in several places in Colossians chapter 1: “the hope laid up for you in heaven” (Col 1:5); the time when Jesus will “present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach” (Col 1:22); and, according to the mystery Paul shared in Col 1:27, believers have this “hope of **glory**.” Paul’s main point in Col 3:4 is that only by living according to the values and priorities of Christ in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit will believers have a hope of mastering the flesh.

Col 3:5 - Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.

“**Therefore**,” because we have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God, we are to consider the members of our earthly bodies to be dead to the sins of the flesh. A more literal translation would be, “**Kill therefore your earthly members.**” Many English translations follow this literal wording. Most use the phrase “put to death” (ASV, CSB, ESV, NET, NIV, NKJV, NLT, RSV) while the KJV says “*mortify* your earthly members.” The single Greek verb *nekroō* is translated “put to death” and it can also mean “to deprive something of its power.” The verb form is an aorist active imperative, which is often used to express the urgent need to take immediate action. As in the previous verses, the Holy Spirit enables us, but we are responsible for doing what is commanded.

The New American Standard Bible (NASB1995) translated this verse to include the involvement of our minds as part of the process, similar to verse 2 which says, “set your *mind* on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.” So it says we are to *consider* our fleshly passions to be dead. If indeed we died, then we must treat the members of our body as dead and unable to respond. When Paul says “consider the *members* of your earthly body as dead,” we understand that the members of the body themselves are merely the instruments that are used to engage in fleshly activities. As Paul said initially, it is our *mind* which controls the use of our body parts. Paul now lists several examples of *sensual sins*.

Immorality (*porneia*) is a general term that refers to any type of sexual activity outside of the marriage relationship.² Different aspects of sexual activity were often part of the pagan temple rituals, so *porneia* was very common in the culture of Paul’s day.

Impurity (*akatharsia*) can refer to any unnatural, filthy, or unapproved sensual action, whether done by oneself or with others, and it includes the idea of perversion.

² One nineteenth-century Greek language expert listed examples of this type of sexual activity, which included adultery, incest, homosexuality, lesbianism, intercourse with animals, and intercourse with a divorced man or woman. [*Thayer’s Greek–English Lexicon*]

Passion (*pathos*) means “lustful desire that does not rest until it is satisfied.” 1 Thess 4:5 calls it “lustful passion,” and Rom 1:26 translates it “degrading or dishonorable passion.”

Evil desire (*epithumia*) is an insatiable longing for what is forbidden. It is a lust to satisfy fleshly appetites and carnal desires which goes beyond actions to include evil thoughts or intentions.

Greed (*pleonexia*) is a “grasping selfishness that has grown into a passion.” In this context it carries the thought of never having enough sensual indulgence. The sensual desires of the flesh are insatiable, and Paul goes even further by saying that they **amount to idolatry**. They can be worshiped and served in the place which God should hold in our lives.

Col 3:6-7 - For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience,⁷ and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them.

Paul provides important motivation for mastering our fleshly nature. He says that these sensual sins (and others like them) are bringing the **wrath of God** upon those who engage in them.

Wrath (*orgē*) is the righteous indignation or anger of God which manifests itself in punishment for sin. To participate in these sins invites the **wrath of God**.

Even though a believer will ultimately be rescued from the **wrath** to come (1 Thess 1:10), sin always has consequences. The last verse of this chapter contains a general principle which applies to believers who participate in the sensual sins. In Col 3:25 Paul writes, “For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.” This is a powerful motivation for believers to reject and avoid the sensual sins and the pull of our old nature toward fleshly indulgence in every area of life.

Paul then gives a second reason to avoid the sins of the flesh. As Paul had said in Col 1:21, “You were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds.” Since God rescued them out of that pitiful condition, it would make no sense to return to that empty and destructive way of life.

Col 3:8 - But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, [and] abusive speech from your mouth.

“**Put them aside**” (*apotithēmi*) means “to put off and lay aside, as when removing soiled clothing.” All of these sins are deeply ingrained in our fleshly nature, so it may require deliberate and sometimes painful decisions on our part through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to put them aside. These relational sins involve both attitudes and actions.

Anger (*orgē*). In verse 6 it was used for the righteous indignation or anger of God toward sin. In the present context it indicates a fleshly attitude of indignation which has a hint of entitlement and bitterness over unmet selfish expectations.

Wrath (*thumos*) is a sudden and passionate outburst of anger or irritation. Believers are called to exercise self-control and not to give vent to angry impulses (James 1:9).

Malice (*kakia*) is an attitude of ill will that is determined to do harm to others.

Slander (*blasphēmia*) is verbal abuse against someone, intended to damage their reputation by spreading evil reports. Synonyms include backbiting, reviling, defaming, insulting, or gossiping about others.

Abusive speech (*aischrologia*) literally means “saying filthy things.” A Christian ought to use a different vocabulary than he used in his life before salvation. We must think before we speak (Eph 5:4) and bridle the tongue (James 1:26).

Col 3:9 - Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its [evil] practices,

Do not lie (*pseudomai*) is a command to “stop the habit of lying to one another.” Lying means misrepresenting the truth with the intent to deceive someone in order to gain something for ourselves. What is translated as “**laid aside**” is the same word Paul used in Col 2:15 when he said that God “*disarmed* the rulers and authorities.” The Greek word *apekduomai* expresses how completely the elemental spirits were stripped of their power. Here he uses the same word to express how completely believers should strip their “**old self with its evil practices**” of power. The word “**old**” (*palaios*) means “ancient, worn by use, and the worse for wear.”

Col 3:10 - and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him--

“**Put on**” (*enduoō*) literally means “to go under, be plunged into, or to sink into” something. It was commonly used for the act of putting on clothing, but the word itself hints at something similar to what happens during believers' baptism. There are two different Greek words for “**new**.” One is *kainos* which means “new in kind or character.” The other is *neos* which means “new in time; fresh or young.” Here Paul used the word *neos* which he places in direct contrast to the old or “ancient” self. The **new self** is the one that was *recently* received at the moment of salvation.

The **new** life itself is continually “**being renewed**” (*anakainoō*) which has *kainos* as its root. So Paul shows that our new life is both new in time, but also new in quality. The process of continuous renewal and spiritual growth involves increasing in **true knowledge** (*epignosis*), which is the same word used in Col 1:9-10 and 2:2. Believers grow in knowledge through the ministry of the Word of God, which the indwelling Holy Spirit applies to our lives.

As we grow spiritually we also become more like our Creator. The believer is gradually conformed to **the image of the One who created him**. Our spiritual growth leads to increasing Christ-likeness.