

**LIFE IN THE SPIRIT, LIFE AGAINST THE FLESH, PT. 2**  
**COLOSSIANS 3**

“In April, 1983, Robert Vierling of Winchester, Missouri was found in his bed, crushed to death by his sixteen-foot, one hundred pound, pet Burmese python. Vierling’s wife said he had complete trust in the snake and often played with it on the bed.” [Whitney, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life*/]

I am curious about many things — but playing with a python in my bed — or anywhere else — is not anything I’ve ever considered. Yet as Whitney also points out, “Each of us lives with many unseen snakes, all more deadly than a Burmese python. These snakes, which are constantly with us, are called ‘sins’ in the Bible. The process of killing them is called mortification.”

How do you keep from getting killed by a python? Don’t get a pet python. And if you have one, kill it before it kills you. How do you keep from being killed by your sin? Don’t get a pet sin. And if you have one, kill it before it kills you. That is the theme of Romans 8:12-13, which can be simply stated as —

**TO LIVE IN THE SPIRIT IS TO LIVE AGGRESSIVELY AGAINST THE FLESH.**

Or to be alive in the Spirit is to live opposed to every manifestation of the flesh in our lives. This is essential, because as A. W. Tozer noted, “But the terrible part about crucifying the flesh is that the flesh is *you*. When the Lord says mortify the flesh, He doesn’t mean abuse your body by starving it or lying on beds of nails. He means put yourself on the cross. That is what people do not want to do....But I do say this: You had better mortify your flesh, or your flesh will do something terrible to you.” [*The Radical Cross*]

While Paul calls us to mortify the flesh in 8:12-13, he only hints at the process of mortification in the surrounding context and subsequent chapters. However, he does give more extensive explanation of how to mortify the flesh in Colossians 3, which is where we want to turn today and next Sunday.

In this passage we will find five ingredients of a life that is mortifying the flesh.

- 1. Seek God as Your Primary DESIRE (v. 1)**
- 2. Change the Way You THINK About God (vv. 2-4)**
  - ✓ Be so HEAVENLY minded you will be of EARTHLY good (v. 2)
  - ✓ Consider your life IN Christ and AS Christ (vv. 3-4)
- 3. Change the Way You Think About SIN (vv. 5-9)**
  - ✓ Identify SIN for what it is (vv. 5-8)
    - Continually identify both sinful actions and sinful attitudes
    - Count the cost of engaging in sin (don’t listen to sin’s sales pitch)
    - Stay away from sin and situations that lead you to sin (be aware of the seasons of sin)
    - Hate your sin
    - Be ignorant about sin
  - ✓ Consider your new POSITION (v. 9)
- 4. Change the Way You Think About OBEDIENCE (vv. 10-14)**
- 5. Be Controlled by the HOLY SPIRIT (vv. 15-17)**

## 1. Seek God as Your Primary **DESIRE** (v. 1)

- At the end of Col. 2, Paul rebukes the Colossians for their moralistic, self-righteous, and legalistic attempts at righteousness (2:20-22). Those are things that *seem* to be beneficial (2:23), but they are of **no value against fleshly indulgence**. That's a striking statement. *No value*. It is not even slightly valuable to fight against sin with asceticism and legalism. We need something better.
- So how will the believer fight against sin? That's what he answers in 3:1-17.
- Notice that Paul begins with a premise — **Therefore** (conclusion drawn from 2:23), **if you have been raised up with Christ**. To be raised up with Christ is a reference to spiritual baptism (Rom. 6:3).
  - ✓ What he is about to say is only for believers in Christ. If you are not a believer in Christ, this is of no value for you. You are stuck in your sin and only able to do sin. You might be "moral," but you will still be unrighteous and incapable of being righteous before God (and He will judge you as unrighteous). This will never help you until you trust in Christ as your Savior.
  - ✓ When Paul says **if...** the sense is, "*since you have been raised up...*" He is affirming that those who are reading this letter really are believers. If you are trusting Christ, this is for you.
- What should the believer do in the war against sin? **Keep seeking the things above** = orient your will and the direction of your life to seek God.
  - ✓ To seek **the things above** is to seek **Christ** Himself (2x), who is **from above**. Notice what Paul says about Christ —
    - By referencing Christ, he presupposes our understanding that Christ was eternally existent with the Father, 1:15-16, ruling and reigning in the eternal past.
    - Christ is with God right now — **seated at His right hand**, ruling with the Father as the sovereign Judge of the universe and all men and things. To be "seated" means His work has been accomplished and He is now positioned to dispense the blessings of His work (Eph. 1:3ff).
    - Because we are to **keep seeking**, he is suggesting Christ will remain on that throne.
  - ✓ To seek **the things above** is to have as the basic orientation of my life to seek the things that are God-honoring, God-exalting, and God-revealing (Mt. 6:19-21, 33)
  - ✓ It is to have Christ as the first place in your life (1:18) and to walk worth of the Lord (1:10).
  - ✓ Paul also says, **keep seeking** (in ongoing pattern), because we are prone to stop seeking Him and instead seek our own satisfactions (whether by legalism, asceticism, license, etc...). The pursuit of God should be the perpetual pattern of the believer's life.
  - ✓ Why should we keep seeking Him? Because He is the eternally authoritative God who is over all things and who is the termination point of all things — everything culminates in Him and for Him (1:20), and our salvation is about being consumed with Him (1:27-28).
    - This is the whole purpose of God's creation of man — to make us holy to glorify Him. This is God's great "You can..." instead of "You must..." (which we couldn't...).

- The battle cry of the one whose life is oriented around Christ is: “for me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). Our attitudes, ambitions, and outlook on life are molded by our relationship with Christ — our allegiance to Him takes precedence over every earthly allegiance.
- The way we fight against sin reveal whether (or how much) our hearts are consumed with Christ and how much we long for Him. So cultivate that thirst (cf. Ps. 27:4-8; 37:3-6; 42:1-2).
- To seek God and Christ is another way of saying, “Seek God as the center of your life,” or “live for the glory of God” or “love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”
  - ✓ Augustine understood the priority of this principle when he said, “Love God and do what you will.” Cultivate a love for God and that will direct all the actions of your life. If you have a genuine love for God, then your actions will be conformed to the righteousness He desires for you.
  - ✓ Don Whitney said it this way: “Too much attention to a particular sin or sins and/or too little attention to communion to God inevitably shrivel the soul of a Christian.” [*10 Questions*, 19.]
- What is the condition of your heart? Not sure? Here are some self-examining questions:
  - ✓ Is my allegiance to Christ? (What is the evidence?)
  - ✓ Am I satisfied with myself (and the amount of remaining sin in my life)? Or do I admit my need for God’s righteousness (Rom. 7:24-25)?
  - ✓ Am I satisfied with physical trinkets and external happiness? Or is righteousness and peace my joy (Js. 3:17-18)?
  - ✓ Do I oppose and/or run from things contrary to His righteousness (Gen. 39:11-12; Js. 4:7- 8)?
  - ✓ Do I *crave* God’s Word? [Hungry men don’t have to be told when to eat; Jer. 15:16.]
  - ✓ Do I categorize my sin? Do I convince myself that because I am innocent of flagrant, blatant sins I am righteous? Or do I recognize the sins of a wayward heart that is judgmental and critical, inclined to anger and resentment, full of worry and anxiety, and prone to wander from the love of God?
  - ✓ Am I unconditional toward God? That is, do I accept what He gives me and does in my life, no matter the demand on me?
  - ✓ In my heart of hearts, what or whom do I love most passionately?
- Until we learn to love God more than sin and the temptations of the flesh, we will never kill sin. Love of God will keep you from loving sin. Satisfaction with God will keep you from being satisfied with sin.
- Or, until we kill sin and regularly resist its temptations, we will not be attracted to God. The more satisfied we are with sin, the less satisfied we will be with God.
- We will only be dissatisfied with sin to the extent that we are satisfied with God.

## 2. Change the Way You **THINK** About God (vv. 2-4)

- In vv. 2-4, Paul builds on the idea in verse 1, telling us that we must also change the way we think about God. Victorious living comes from having the aim of following Christ, *and* an inner disposition to follow Him. “You must not only *seek* Heaven; you must also *think* Heaven.” [Lightfoot]

### • Be so **HEAVENLY** minded you will be of **EARTHLY** good (v. 2)

- ✓ Paul says ***set your mind on the things above*** — on the things that are in Heaven. What — or who — is in Heaven? ***Christ*** and the Father (v. 1). And the Spirit and the Word (3:16-17). And all righteousness and truth. And all the blessings that flow from God and His righteousness. And the completion of our salvation and the fulfillment of God’s eternal purposes for mankind. And everything that is eternal.
- ✓ To set our minds on the things that are above echoes what Paul says in **2 Cor. 4:18**. It is to recognize that nothing that we have on earth will be in Heaven (except people). To make much of life on earth (and win the fight against sin), we have to consider what is of eternal value and consequence. We give in to sin because we think it is eternal and Heaven is temporal. We need to focus our attention on what will really last and where our joy really will be.
  - In 100 years, the woman who is the object of your lust will be an undesirable skeleton in a coffin
  - In 100 years, the company you yearn to own will likely no longer exist
  - In 100 years, the technology that you must have will be as obsolete as a Model-T Ford is today
  - In 100 years, the bank account you are seeking to build will be valueless
  - In 100 years, whatever is enticing you to pride or anger or covetousness or greed will not exist
  - In 100 years, if you are a believer, you will be less than 3 hours into an eternal stay in Heaven (if 1000 years are as one day)
  - In 100 years, every person in this room who is a believer in Christ will be more alive than today (and someone we’d be tempted to worship today, if we could see them).
  - We lose the battle against sin and we destroy relationships for the sake of our sinful indulgences because we believe that relationships are temporal and possessions are eternal. We have it exactly backwards. We must look to the things that are above when we are fighting against sin and remind ourselves of what will last and what will be destroyed.
- ✓ If we are going to mortify our sin, it will be through intentional meditation on Christ and our position in Christ (more on that in vv. 9ff). Our tendency is to not think.
- ✓ Recently Raye Jeanne and I had an appointment in FW. I was several miles down the road when she quietly asked, “Are we going to \_\_\_\_\_?” “Yup.” And then I realized what she was asking. She wanted to know why I was going the opposite direction. I was on “autopilot” and wasn’t being purposeful. And too often we lose the battle against sin for the very same reason. We just aren’t thinking. We aren’t thinking about sin, or God, or Christ, or Heaven and what is eternal. And so we drift aimlessly into sin. And are perplexed about why we are there again.

- ✓ In order to be of earthly good, we are going to have to set our minds and hearts on Christ and Heaven and what is eternal — and let those thoughts dictate and guide our decisions against sin.
- ✓ Paul identifies two additional items for us to think about in relation to God and Heaven —

- Consider your life IN Christ and AS Christ (vv. 3-4)

- ✓ Christ is not merely the means for our forgiveness from sin; He is also the power for our fight against sin. And that power is made available to us through our identity with Him. So Paul says...
- ✓ **For you have died...** Obviously he doesn't mean literally. So what does he mean? We have been identified with Christ in His death for sin (**Rom. 6:3b-6**). [Aside: do you notice how often we are referencing Romans 6? That is a monumentally important chapter for the believer's life.]
  - We have been baptized into Christ's death — united with Him in His death and resurrection.
  - The purpose of the unification with Him is so that we might walk in new life (not sinful life).
  - The purpose of our unity was so that we would be enslaved to Him and not sin.
  - So in Col. 3, Paul means, "if you pursue sin, you are pursuing things to which you are already dead and for which Christ died. Why are you still letting those sins harm you?" When we were identified with Christ's death, we were given power over sin — the condemning sins that controlled us no longer controlled us. Don't continue in them.
- ✓ Then Paul adds that we not only have died with Christ, but our lives are **hidden with Christ in God**.
  - We are *with* Christ. We have a common life with the Father and the Son *already* (2 Pt. 1:4).
  - He is our protection from sin and the world and all spiritual foes (see **Rom. 8:31-39**)
- ✓ But our life is not only *hidden* with Christ; our very life *is* Christ — **He is our life** (v. 4a; **Phil. 1:21**).
  - "We are poor only for this reason, that we do not know our riches in Christ." [Sibbes]
  - Not only do we have life *with* and *by* and *through* Christ, but the intimacy is so close that it can be said that His life is our life (**Gal. 2:20**)! He is living His life through ours. Now if you are a frustrated baseball player attempting to live your dreams through your son, that's dangerous; but if the Christ of creation is living through us, that's glorious!
  - Notice v. 4b — at the revelation of *all* Christ's glory, we will also **be revealed in glory**. Just as His glory will be revealed to us in Heaven, so our justification and glorification will be revealed in Heaven (**1 Jn. 3:2f**). That is the motivation and power for living renewed, unindulgent lives.

- To win the fight against sin, we must purposefully, intentionally think about our relationship with Christ. We must think why He died. ("Did He die to liberate me from this action, never to do it again? Or did He die to liberate me from something else so I could do this? Does He rejoice when I do this?") We must think of our position in Him and with Him and the prospect of being with Him in glory.
- A few weeks ago, I was getting a little cranky at home — my schedule was full of good things, but full. And Raye Jeanne's schedule was full. And our family life was full. And while we were at home together most nights, we weren't having substantive conversations and relaxing meals (Sat breakfast!). I missed my wife and I was being cranky about it. Do we long for Christ in the same way?

- Are we sorrowful and sad and long for Christ when we are pressed for time? If you and I are going to kill sin we must consider our identity with Christ and we must consider Christ as our very life.
- We must not only change the way we think about God and Christ, but we must also change the way we think about sin... [Aside: much of the spiritual life is about mind renewal — it's learning to think new ways and then out of the mind that is transformed to Christlikeness, we live in God-honoring ways.]

### 3. Change the Way You Think About SIN (vv. 5-9)

- Identify SIN for what it is (vv. 5-8) Paul draws a conclusion from what he says about the way we are to think in new ways — **therefore**. Because we are thinking in particular ways about God, we also ought to think in particular ways about the flesh, our bodies, and sin.

#### ✓ Continually identify both sinful actions and sinful attitudes

- Paul identifies a number of sins in vv. 5-8.
- He identifies sins we do —
  - ... **Immorality** —including every kind of sexual sin (*porneia* = “pornography,” sexual writing). This is unrighteous thinking about God’s gracious gift of marital sexual relationship.
  - ... **Impurity** — “uncleanness,” opposite of “holiness,” usually applied morally more than physically or sexually. It is a broad term of unrighteousness.
  - ... Elsewhere we are commonly commanded to flee immorality and flee to righteousness (e.g., 1 Tim. 6:11-14; 2 Tim. 2:20-23; 1 Cor. 6:18-20)
- He identifies sins of speech.
  - ... **Anger** — a settled anger that is long-lasting and vengeful
  - ... **Wrath** — an explosive, burning, quick anger — intense indignation
  - ... **Malice** — anger expressed in physical action, a bent towards hurting others (shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, covet).
  - ... **Slander** — belittling others to destroy their reputations.
  - ... **Abusive speech** — obscene, filthy talking.
  - ... **Lying** — lit., “STOP lying to each other...” (lying is in conflict with the One who is *the Truth*).
- He identifies sins of desire.
  - ... **Passion** — a depraved passion that will not rest until it is satisfied.
  - ... **Evil desires** — lit., “evil lusts,” referring to all evil longings and thoughts. Even with the indwelling of the HS, evil thoughts are always a danger against which we must fight.
  - ... **Greed...which is idolatry** — this is insatiable selfishness, both for money in particular and covetousness in general. The greedy man (and all sin rooted in some form of greed) is an idolater because he prefers the object rather than the Creator, worshipping gain instead of God.

“Evil behavior begins with evil thoughts. Therefore the battle against all sin...begins in the mind.” [J. Mac]

“Every sin is a kind of cursing God in the heart; an aim at the destruction of the being of God; not actually, but virtually...A man in every sin aims to set up his own will as his rule, and his own glory as the end of his actions against the will and glory of God.” [Stephen Charnock.]

- Paul has dealt with both the inner and outer man. Both what we desire and do is important. And this list is appropriate whether you are five or 85 — all people sin with desire and deed.
- All people sin with deeds and words. This list is for everyone.
  - ... We cannot have these things as a regular part of our lives and be in fellowship with Christ.
  - ... We cannot dwell on these desires without having them corrupt our hearts and then erupt into deadly deeds and wasted words.
  - ... Mortifying the flesh means continually assessing (each day/hour) the nature of your conduct and speech and the kind of heart that is producing those things. What do my words say about my desires? What do my deeds say about my desires?
- Paul also tells us why we should be attentive to these things:
  - ... Because God will pour out His wrath on the unrighteous for these kinds of things (v. 6)
  - ... Because these things were what we were and not what we are (v. 7). If (since) we are in Christ, this is no longer our life; we ought not to live as if that is our life.
  - ... In our neighborhood we don't get many trick-or-treaters at Halloween, but I'm always happy to give out candy on that day (I get the leftovers!). But I have a pet peeve. I don't like giving candy to 18-year-olds who came dressed up in some foolish costume. It's incongruous that an adult should act like a child (1 Cor. 13:11 — when I became a man I did away with childish things). If we are in Christ, we ought not go back to the kind of lifestyle we had before Christ. That's no longer who we are.

✓ **Count the cost of engaging in sin (don't listen to sin's sales pitch)**

- Sin will never tell you the truth about its end. It always offers freedom and only gives enslavement. It promises joy and it produces bitterness. It promises unending happiness and it gives regret. Sin *never* (I use that word purposefully) will deliver on its promises. In fact, it will always (ultimately) give only the opposite of its promises. Sin always deceives. Sin never tells the truth.
- God tells the truth about sin — the unbelieving will receive unending wrath from God for these things (v. 6) and the believing will receive discipline for them (implied in v. 7; cf. Heb. 12).
- Moreover, there is also always temporal cost to sin. Do you consider the cost of sin and lack of repentance? Do you calculate what it will cost you to continue in it (Lk. 14:28; Prov. 5:7-14)?

✓ **Stay away from sin and situations that lead you to sin**

- When Paul says, **put them all aside** (v. 8) and **stop lying** (v. 9), he means us to understand that we have a choice about sin. We don't have to do it. And we should get away from it.

- Joseph is the example we often use. And Jonah is his contrast. Joseph ran from sin to righteousness while Jonah ran from righteousness to sin. Run from sin to Christ.
- There is no sin that is good for us. They should *all* be put aside. We continually work to stay away from sin. So Paul exhorts us in **Rom. 13:14**, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” In other words, stay as far away from sin as possible so that you don’t give it an easy entry point into your life.
- Listen to Deepak Reju (*Fighting for Purity*):

Picture yourself as a valiant knight — sword of the Spirit in your sheath, shield in hand with the cross as its emblem, belt of truth around your waist, and breastplate of righteousness on your chest. You are ready to do battle with your mortal enemy.

Across from you is a fire-breathing, fifty-foot dragon. Almond eyes, smoke billowing from its nostrils, spines from head to tail, fanlike wings, and sharp teeth. It stares at you. Drool drips from its mouth. This dragon is your sinful nature. It’s your flesh.

The stark reality of this battle is that if you don’t kill sin, it will kill you. The dragon lunges at you. You hold up your shield and swing your sword with all your strength. You fight; it attacks. You protect yourself and then go on the offensive. The dragon steps back, but only temporarily. You are both constantly battling each other.

Whenever you [engage in sin] it’s like you are throwing this beast a juicy steak. The more you give it, the more it grows. And it always wants more. It’s never satisfied. The only way to destroy its power is to starve it to death.

- Can we agree that we must purposefully starve the dragon?
- Some helpful counsel: recognize the seasons when you might be particularly tempted to sin.
  - ... Seasons of unusual affliction and suffering (Job; **Ps. 119:67**)
  - ... Seasons of unusual prosperity (**Prov. 1:29-32; 30:7-9**)
  - ... Seasons of idleness and leisure (**2 Sam. 11:1-2**)
  - ... Seasons of physical weariness and emptiness (**Ps. 63:1**)
  - ... Seasons that are particular to you — what is the condition of *your* heart, where do *you* particularly struggle (**Mk. 7:21-23**)? Recognize the circumstances that will lead you into those sins.

#### ✓ Hate your sin

- You will not grow in righteousness until you learn to hate sin. There is a kind of hate that is right and good and it is a hatred of sin.
- Until you hate sin, you will not love Christ, and until you love Christ, you will not hate sin.
- One key verse: **Ps. 119:128**.

✓ Be ignorant about sin (Rom. 16:19; Eph. 5:3)

- There are some things we can't help knowing about (because it comes out of us). But we should be ignorant about what the world does in cultivating sin. And that means we are going to have to turn off the 10:00 news or not click on a news link or fold the newspaper. We are going to have to make conscious decisions, "I don't want to know about that..."
- When Paul says in Eph. 5:3 not to talk about such things, he also implies, "we don't talk about it because we don't know about it."

• Consider your new POSITION (v. 9)

- ✓ Don't sin (lie), *because you have laid aside the old self with its evil practices...* I.e., "You trusted Christ (and by so doing repudiated your sin), and He graced you with forgiveness and with a new life of redemption."
- ✓ Salvation has disarmed the power of sin over us; we now have the ability to starve our sin by not feeding it lies and anger....
- ✓ We can do this because of our new position before Christ as redeemed people. *We don't live as unregenerate, guilty people. We live as those who are welcomed into paradise.*

- Jer. 31:33 *"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."*
- Ezek. 36:26 *"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."*

- ✓ "Grace not only saves the soul with an everlasting salvation, but it also imparts a nature which delights in everything that belongs to God, because it is divine..." [C.H. Mackintosh]
  - ✓ *To continue in sin is not only inconsistent with what happened at salvation; it is also inconsistent with the power that was provided at salvation.*
  - ✓ To fight against sin, remember the new position you have in Christ Jesus.
- If we are going to win the battle against sin, we will have to change the way we think about Christ (vv. 1-4), and we are also going to defang the dragon of sin and think of sin in new ways also.
  - The battle to mortify sin begins not by changing our habits, but by changing our minds.

**BENEDICTION:** Romans 8:37-39

**First Service** — Be sure to take advantage of the hospitality area. Find some physical refreshment and even more look for an opportunity to give spiritual refreshment: get to know someone you don't know; give a word of encouragement to someone who needs help and hope; pray with anyone who has a need.

**Second Service** — If you have children in the nursery or children's church, please serve our workers in those areas by picking them up immediately after we are dismissed.