

Pursue Christ: Put Sin to Death

March 23, 2025

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Colossians 3:1-11

Session Outline

1. Things Above (Colossians 3:1-4)
2. Put to Death (Colossians 3:5-9)
3. The New Self (Colossians 3:10-11)

Theological Theme

When we are saved, we are called to actively seek Jesus and leave our sin behind. This requires personal sacrifice and hard work, but the Holy Spirit is present in the life of every believer, walking with us and molding us to be more like Jesus.

Call to Action

The words “put to death” are a command from Paul. Believers should take seriously the need to root sin out of their lives. What is one area of your life that needs to be “put to death”?



Leader Guide

Pursue Christ: Put Sin to Death

Introduction

Archery has been around for millennia, dating all the way back to around 10,000 BC, when Egyptians used bows and arrows to hunt and make war. Portrayal of archers graces ancient Egyptian motifs, Greco-Roman pottery, and folklore that still reaches us today (like Robin Hood). Over time, Archery has developed into a recreational activity and competitive sport.¹

Archery has been included among the ranks of Olympic sporting events since 1972.² Today, the best archers from around the world gather every four years for fierce competition. To excel at the Olympic level, athletes must be on their A game. Missing the mark by even the slightest amount could cost you a place on the Olympic podium.

Did you know “sin” started out as an archery term? Sin simply means to miss the mark—to fall short.³ An archer misses the mark when his or her arrow doesn’t land where he or she intended. As Christians, the “mark” we aim for is to live like Jesus as the Bible teaches. “We miss the mark (or sin) when we fail to fully love God and others. Sin is selfish. We sin when insist on taking things into our own hands instead of trusting God’s way. Sin places other things above God in our lives.”⁴

Paul had a lot to say about sin in his epistles and ministry, and we will unpack some of that teaching in today’s text.



- ❓ What are some areas where it is difficult to “hit a bullseye” in daily life?
- ❓ What kinds of things cause us to miss the mark when it comes to following Jesus daily?

Session Summary

In today’s text, Paul shared practical instruction with the Colossians on how to live as Christians. As a congregation under fire from false teachers, the Colossian believers needed a reminder about the importance of walking in the way of the Lord. So, Paul advised them to focus on Christ and not on earthly matters.

When we are saved, our old life ends, and we receive a new life of freedom with Christ. This doesn't mean the road will be easy, but we do have the constant help of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us. He continuously works for our good, shaping us to live and behave more like Jesus.

1. Things Above (Colossians 3:1-4)

-  What does it mean to “seek the things above” (v. 1) or “set your minds on things above” (v. 2)?
-  How is that different than setting our minds on “earthly things” (v. 2)?

So far in our trip through Colossians, Paul has shared encouragement and doctrinal teachings. In chapter 3, he made a transition to practical instruction.

In pagan traditions, morality was a nonissue. You could worship your god, drop off a sacrifice, then continue a life of debauchery and sin. Behavior was not directly correlated with belief.⁵ Remember the congregation in Colossae was largely Gentiles, so they would have been surrounded by idol worship that required no personal life changes. Western culture today teaches the same thing: Live your truth, the way you define it, in whatever way makes you happy. The Christian life calls for a very different approach.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24b). Earlier in Matthew, Jesus also taught that we should “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you” (Matthew 6:33). To follow Jesus well, we must deny ourselves and prioritize Jesus (“the kingdom of God”) above all things. Paul’s writing prompts us to ask the question: What are we seeking first?

In our text today, Paul wrote about where we should focus our attention: things above instead of earthly things. When we set our minds on heavenly concerns and seek “things above” (v. 2), we are ordering our priorities as Jesus taught: denying ourselves and seeking God first.

When we are focused on earthly things, we become wrapped up in what the world tells us is important, and that list is often not aligned with how the Bible teaches us to live. In a self-centered culture that rejects Jesus, living by the world’s guidelines is a mistake.

Paul recommended to instead live focused on things above. We often live our lives fully focused on what we want, just glancing at God when it's convenient—like on Sunday mornings. Paul, and Scripture in general, makes the reverse recommendation: We should stare at God and glance at our own lives. This is a very different way of life!

When we focus on and “seek the things above” (v. 1), we seek to live the way God wants us to. We honor Him. We prioritize Him. We deny ourselves and seek first the kingdom.

Paul went on to break down our relationship with Jesus starting in verse 3:

“For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (v. 3). The idea here is that our old, sinful lives—when we lived for ourselves and what we desired—died with Christ. We are dead to sin, but alive in Jesus. We are new creations now (2 Corinthians 5:17), and the world isn't our home anymore; our home is with Jesus.

“When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (v.4). As believers, Jesus is our life. In Philippians, Paul put it this way, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21). When we properly focus on “the things above” (v. 1), Jesus is our life. He sits at the very top of our priority list. We make decisions through the lens of living for Him. He guides our days because we have submitted to Him. Remember our earlier question: What are we seeking first? When Jesus is our life, the answer is Him and His kingdom—a stark contrast to our lives when we were still slaves to sin.

- Application: Think about what you're currently seeking. Where are you seeking things above, and where could you grow?

2. Put to Death (Colossians 3:5-9)

- What does it mean to “put to death what belongs to our earthly nature” (v. 5)?
- Look at the sin Paul outlined in verses 5 and 8-9. How do we see these today? What do they look like and why are they a problem?

This portion of our text deals with the idea of sin. You'll remember we earlier defined sin as missing the mark and falling short of God's will and plan for us. Sin is a problem because it separates us from God and acts as a roadblock to God's good plan for our lives. Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away” (Matthew 5:29).

Gouging out your eye requires radical sacrifice, and Jesus meant that we should be willing to make radical sacrifices to kick sin out of our lives.

In our text today, Paul made a similar point. Putting something to death is radical, and it paints a clear picture: We should be serious about our sin. Paul and Jesus certainly were. When we're seeking Jesus and not earthly things, we put to death sinful human desires like the ones Paul listed. Like Jesus, Paul wasn't speaking literally. He was emphasizing that radical action needed to be taken. Remember, the pagan culture of the day didn't require any change in behavior, but Jesus has a higher standard.

In verse 5, Paul listed several features of our earthly nature, including sexual sin, which is any sexual immorality not aligned with what Scripture teaches; greed, which means wanting more than what you have and pertains to both things/money and pleasures; and idolatry, which is prioritizing anything else above Jesus. These vices are deadly, and those who live this way apart from Jesus are at risk of facing God's wrath (v. 6). Before we knew Jesus, we were slaves to our sin, but in Jesus we have freedom. Now, we must live differently.

Paul advised to put away "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language" (v. 8) and lying (v. 9). When we focus on earthly things, this is how we behave. (Paul taught on this idea in his writings on the fruit of the flesh in Galatians 5 as well.) These things are a far cry from the fruit of the Spirit in our lives: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). "Put away" (v. 8) is another way to say remove or take off, and like removing a winter coat, it takes repeated action.⁶ We make an ongoing decision to "put away" (v. 8) these things. We won't always get it right, but seeking Jesus isn't about being perfect, it's about growing over time. The more we focus on "things above" (v. 1), the more the fruit of the Holy Spirit will be cultivated in our lives, and the more the fruit of the flesh will fade away.

- 🔍 Application: What are some ways we can begin to put sin to death in our lives today?

3. The New Self (Colossians 3:10-11)

- 🔍 What is the "new self" we receive in Jesus?
- 🔍 How does Jesus break down dividing walls of identity among His people (v. 11)?

Life After Death

Paul exhorted the Colossians to put to death whatever belonged to their "earthly nature" (3:5). This suggests that they had not been living consistently with the principle of a spiritual death and resurrection in their conversion.

The ideas in these verses are foundational to the way believers live their lives: They “put off the old self with its practices” (v. 9) and “put on the new self” (v. 10). Just like the changing of a winter coat, this act is evident to those around you, even if it is misunderstood.⁷

The process of moving away from sin in our lives and actively seeking after God is a continual one—it requires ongoing dedication and sacrifices—but the process of salvation is immediate. When we accept Jesus into our lives, we receive “the new self” Paul mentioned in verse 10. Now that we are new creations in Christ, we are “being renewed” (v. 10). This is both active and ongoing. We aren’t renewed and perfected all at once. It’s a continuous work by the Holy Spirit in our lives. We are in the process of “being renewed” (v. 10) or being molded to look more like Jesus in the way we live our lives. This process of being “conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29) is God’s desire for our lives. He causes all things in our lives to work toward this purpose (Romans 8:28).

The Judaizers confused the gospel in the early church by falsely teaching that a Gentile must first convert to Judaism before that person could become a Christian. Paul once again debunked that idea here. As believers in Christ, we are all on equal footing. No distinction exists between Jews and Gentiles, those that have been circumcised and those that haven’t, or a slave and a free person. The human divisions we create don’t exist in Jesus. We are united in Christ. Christ is supreme and dwells in all of us.⁸



Application: In verse 11, Paul spoke about divisions the Colossian church faced in their everyday lives. What divisions exist for us in 2025? What are some ways we can help bring more unity in our community?

Conclusion

Paul taught where we should focus our attention: above on Jesus and His kingdom rather than on “earthly things” (v. 2). We follow Paul’s instruction to “seek the things above” (v. 1) when we continuously set our minds on these things (v. 2). This requires work and daily effort. We must daily decide to take off the heavy coat of a life stifled by slavery to sin and put on the comforting coat of a life of freedom with Jesus. The world won’t understand this, and our actions might attract mocking attention. We might lose some friends. We could even be “canceled,” but Jesus is worth it.

Following Paul’s teaching on seeking heavenly things over earthly ones, he outlined common areas of sin. These struggles may look different in 2025, but they are as alive and well for us in 2025 as they were for the Colossian congregation Paul wrote to in this letter. Paul warned against works of the flesh like sexual sin, greed, and idolatry, and advised us to kick “anger,

wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language” (v. 8) and lying (v. 9) out of our lives. This will require radical sacrifice and isn’t a one-and-done action like tossing out the trash; it requires a daily commitment to following Jesus no matter the cost.

When we were saved, we put off our “old self” (v. 9) and put on a new self in Christ. We were reborn. Now, the Holy Spirit is renewing us. Every day, when we spend time with the Lord, study His Word, speak to Him in prayer, and love Him with our hearts and our minds, we are being shaped to live and behave more like Jesus. God even accomplishes this through experiences we have, both the good and the bad. God works all things together for this purpose (Romans 8:28). None of us are perfect. We are all on equal footing, united as a body of believers in Christ.

- ❓ Consider Paul’s instruction to focus on things above rather than on “earthly things” (v. 2). What changes can we make to shift our perspective this direction?
- ❓ In what ways can we actively seek out the renewal mentioned in verse 10? Why is it important we do this together and not in isolation?
- ❓ How can we as a group support and encourage each other as we work to fight sin and focus on heavenly things, better orienting our lives toward Jesus?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for the process of renewal He is leading us through. Thank Him for saving us from slavery to sin and giving us true freedom. Ask Him to help you get serious about kicking sin out of your lives. Ask Him to show you areas of sin and to show you how to move forward in repentance with a focus on seeking after Him.

Memory Verse

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.
—Colossians 3:2

Additional Resources

- *Be Complete* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Exalting Jesus in Colossians & Philemon* by Danny Akin
- *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* by Douglas Moo

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Colossians

Purpose

Paul wrote to counter the “Colossian heresy” that he considered an affront to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The false teaching is identified as a “philosophy” (2:8), presumably drawn from some Hellenistic traditions as indicated by the references to “his fullness” (1:19); the “elements of the world” (Gk *stoicheia*, 2:8, 20); “wisdom” (2:3, 23); and “self-made religion” (2:23). In addition, the false teaching contained Jewish elements such as circumcision (2:11; 3:11); “human tradition” (2:8); Sabbath observance, food regulations, festival participation (2:16); the “worship of angels” together with “access to a visionary realm” (2:18); and harsh human regulations (2:21–23). Paul addressed this syncretistic philosophy by setting forth a proper understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and by noting appropriate implications for Christian conduct.

Author

The Apostle Paul is identified as the author of Colossians (1:1; 4:18). The church fathers unreservedly endorsed Pauline authorship (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 3.14.1; Tertullian, *De Praescr. Haer.*, 7; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.*, 1.1; cp. Justin, *Dialogue*, 85.2; 138.2). A close reading of Colossians reveals a considerable number of lexical, grammatical, and theological similarities with the other Pauline writings (1:9, 26; 2:11–14, 16, 20–21; 3:1, 3, 5–17). Also favoring the authenticity of Colossians as a letter of Paul is its close connection with Philemon, an epistle widely regarded as Pauline.

Setting

During his ministry in Ephesus (Ac 19:10), Paul sent Epaphras to spread the gospel in the Lycus Valley. Epaphras subsequently established the church at Colossae (1:7; 4:12–13). The city’s population consisted mostly of Phrygians and Greeks, but it also included a significant number of Jews. The church, likewise, was mostly composed of Gentiles (1:21, 27; 2:13), but it also had Jewish members (2:11, 16, 18, 21; 3:11). When Epaphras (Phm 23) informed Paul of certain heretical teachings that had spread there, Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians as a theological antidote.

Special Features

Paul’s letter to the church at Colossae is one of the prison letters (along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon). Paul’s desire with this letter was to correct the false teachings that were cropping up in the church. In doing so, Paul presented a clear picture of Jesus Christ as supreme Lord of the universe, head of the church, and the only one through whom forgiveness is possible.

Extended Commentary

Colossians 3:1-11

3:1–2 So if resumes the implications of believers' identification with Christ begun in 2:20. It signals a shift in the epistle from doctrinal instruction (chaps. 1–2) to practical application (3:1–4:6). The objects of believers' efforts and thoughts are Christ and things above rather than earthly things. These commands contrast true spiritual living with the false spirituality promoted by earthly "philosophy."

3:3 The basis for the commands (vv. 1–2) lies in believers' union with Christ. Hidden connotes that God fully completed the action in the past with permanent results.

3:4 At present Christ dwells at God's right hand in heaven and is hidden from the view of those living on earth. At some future point he will appear in the fullness of his glory. When this occurs, believers will also appear with Christ in glory.

3:5 The command to put to death (2:20; Mt 5:29–30; Rm 8:13) refers to the practical outworking of seeking and thinking about heavenly things. Paul offered a fivefold catalog of vices explaining what he meant by what belongs to your earthly nature. These vices are listed moving from specific outward behaviors to general inward inclinations and thoughts.

3:6 God's wrath indicates the severe consequences for these sins.

3:7 Once walked emphasizes the discontinuity between believers' new and former ways of life.

3:8 Put away literally means to "take off" or "remove" something and may evoke the familiar Pauline metaphor of changing clothes (Rm 13:12; Eph 4:22). All the vices listed relate to behaviors that disrupt interpersonal relationships.

3:9–10 The metaphor of changing clothes pertains to an actual observable change of behavior. The new self replaces the old but is also continuously being renewed to reflect the image of God. The reference to the new self applies to individuals but also carries corporate connotations relating to the body of Christ (1:15–20).

3:11 The old order was characterized by ethnic and social division, but the new order obliterates those distinctions in the body of Christ (see Gl 3:27–28). The phrase Christ is all and in all refers to his supremacy (1:17) and indwelling presence in believers (1:27).⁹

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