

Guest Sermon

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Preacher: Rev. Josh Ruiter

[0:00] Good morning, Church of the Advent. Merry Christmas to you and to your family. Merry Christmas from Candace and myself, and from your sister church, St. John's, up here in Southampton, Pennsylvania.

It's good to be with you this morning, this Christmas season. This season where we can celebrate. Celebrate God becoming man and dwelling among us. Celebrating God being willing to send His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to live the life we should have lived.

To die the death we should have died, to rise again conquering hell and death and Satan by His life, death, and resurrection. And celebrating that with the inauguration of it all, which is His birth.

This morning I want to invite you into the middle of a sermon series we're working through up here at St. John's. And that is a sermon series in the book of Colossians. We find ourselves this morning in Colossians chapter 3. We're going to spend our time in verses 5 through 11, but in order to do so, I just want to sum up what Paul says in verses 1 through 4, and that is this.

Set your mind on things above, not things on earth. What he's calling the Colossian church and you and me to in this statement is simply this. Focus your eyes.

[1:12] Set your gaze on Christ and who He is. Set your focus on what He has done for you. Not your day to day, but His eternal gift to you.

His birth, His life, His death, His resurrection. The very life, the very person, the very deity that gave us hope, that gives us hope and joy in a future.

Having done that then, he says, you have an identity. Your identity is no longer what you fight for day by day. It's what's been given you, a free gift of grace in Jesus Christ. Now wear this identity. Having established that, he says, now in order to wear this identity well, you must take off the old that you might put on the new. Now I don't know about you, but when I was younger, I worked a multitude of odd jobs.

Odds and ends jobs here and there. Some jobs more pertinent than others. Some jobs because I couldn't find a career job just yet. One of those jobs was in construction. During college, just post-college, I found myself building pole barns and horse barns.

[2:16] Now this morning, we're not going to talk about construction, but about work attire. When I was working construction, my work wardrobe required heavy jeans, which quickly became worn and torn and grease laden.

I also was required to wear steel-toed boots, work gloves, hoodies, a Carhartt jacket, overalls in the winter, a face mask in the bitter cold, a hard hat, and a tool belt.

Having become a pastor later in life, I was required to get an entirely new wardrobe. No longer are well-worn greased jeans and steel-toed work boots appropriate.

No longer am I required to wear a hard hat and a face mask, pandemics notwithstanding, a Carhartt jacket or a tool belt. These are no longer acceptable or representative of my new career.

Now my wardrobe is slacks or khakis, wingtip dress shoes, an overpriced button-up shirt that comes without a collar, so I have to buy a hard, almost plastic-like collar that is attached by metal buttons known as collar buttons.

[3:23] I digress. But the point is this. When our identity changes, so too does our wardrobe. Going from pole barns to pulpits required a complete overhaul of my work attire.

For Paul, writing to the Colossian church, he saw this very same need in their Christian lives. Having come to a new identity in Christ, setting their minds on things above, not on earth, the church needed clear direction about what of their old lives had to be put off so that their new identity in Christ might rightly and fully be put on.

For Paul, this meant certain old behaviors, old lifestyles, having to do with sexuality and speech as we see in the text for today. Two central areas, as it were, of human life, both in Colossa and our lives today.

Both had to be dealt with. Both of these areas come with the capability for great good when used in Christ or great evil when abused by the enemy and in the world.

When it comes to the old lifestyle, the worldly use of sexuality and speech, we aren't to treat it lightly, Paul says. It isn't suggested that we slowly wean ourselves off these old behaviors and lifestyles.

[4 : 38] It isn't suggested that we avoid them as often as possible or toy with them as continuing possibility for some time later in life. Paul says very emphatically, put these to death because God's wrath is coming on account of these behaviors and lifestyles.

These parts of our old life, of our old identity, before claiming our identity in Christ, they have to be killed. They have to be put to death. So this morning we're going to look at these two categories of sex and speech and what it means for us to put them off, that we might fully and completely put on our identity in Christ and grow in maturity in this new identity in Him.

Before we do that, let us pray for God's help in understanding and applying this text. Heavenly Father, God, we thank you for this Christmas season. We thank you for the gift of your Son incarnate coming to earth, coming to live the life we should have lived, to die the death we should have died.

We thank you for the joy, the hope, and the guaranteed future that comes with this season and Easter season alike. We ask God as we work through this scripture, these set of verses, that you might open our hearts and minds, dig out our ears, let these words be not my words, but your words.

We ask that as we apply them to our lives, that they might take effect, that they might root themselves deeply in us and change the way we walk, we talk, and we live in the world around us.

[6 : 09] In your name we pray. Amen. So this morning, starting in chapter 3, verse 5, we see Paul saying, put to death, put to death sexual behavior, put to death sexual misbehavior, I should say.

And Paul gives us a list of five things that contains both actions and thoughts. It's not just what we do, but what we think. It's our head, our heart, and our hands that shows who we are and whose we are.

And he says, put to death sexual immorality, put to death impurity and passion and evil desires and covetousness, for these are the things that are bringing God's wrath.

A very dear friend of mine and Christian brother who has done ministry with me in the past, who has walked through many parts of life with me, the good, the bad, the ugly, the redeemed, and the still being redeemed.

This friend of mine, about 40 years ago, for the first time in his life, finally admitted that he was sexually broken. Not sexually struggling, not sexually working things out, but broken.

[7 : 18] Now, he wasn't out picking up prostitutes on street corners, nor was he engaging in regular promiscuous encounters, but he was addicted to porn. And at the same time, he had reached a point in his life where his faith has now mattered more to him than his own desires of the flesh.

And even though he had reached this point, his addiction didn't just cease to exist because he had made a commitment. He had also reached a point in his life where he longed to be married, and to be married to a godly woman.

But he was confronted with the reality. The reality that until he took off his lifestyle of instant sexual gratification, he could never enter into a relationship well.

He could never look at a woman rightly without his brokenness creeping in and objectifying the lady, even if only for a moment, ruining his ability to see her as fully human.

Seeing her as a child of God and not an object for fulfilling his desires and passions. Desires and passions, by the way, words Paul uses to call out sexual misbehavior of the world in verse 5.

[8 : 28] So my friend got rid of his TV. He gave it away. He shut off his internet. He traded in his iPhone for a flip phone. He began to, in his own way, put off the things of the world that drove him to sexual misbehavior.

And he signed up for Sexaholics Anonymous. He also went to his pastor and to his Christian brothers and confessed his sin and asked for accountability. He walked in this for three plus years.

He's still walking in it, but as a man on the right side of the addiction, of the misbehavior. A man with a new identity in Christ, able to live in it more fully and well.

Three years into this journey, he met a woman. And for the first time in his life, he was able to enter in. His newfound identity in Christ, paired with his putting to death the old behaviors of sexual brokenness, allowed him to put on Christ and to be as Christ for this young woman who had just lost her mother to cancer.

One year later, as they were dating, she was baptized as an Anglican, nonetheless. And six months later, they were married. But this man still would tell you he could not have gotten to where he was when he met his would-be wife, nor to where he is today in his Christian walk, without taking the words and the message of Colossians 3, 5-6 extremely seriously, and committing nearly a half a decade of his life to putting to death the sexual sin in his life.

[10:07] And while we don't all have a past like his, I think we can all be challenged and encouraged by the intentionality that he showed in throwing off the sin that kept him from fully embracing his identity in Christ.

We must be honest and intentional in our own lives, in the same way that he was. If you're single, have you found yourself struggling with this question, how far is too far in your dating relationship? It's the wrong question. I've asked that question when I was a younger man. But if we're being honest with each other, if we're willing to be honest, it's just pushing the boundaries to fulfill our own desires and passions.

As soon as we must ask questions about boundaries, our intentions aren't truly pure. They're being tainted by our desires, by our passions, by what we want.

We want to put the cart in front of the horse, even though in our hearts we know that it doesn't work. If you're married but find yourself fantasizing, or from time to time starting, sorry, staring at a man or woman who is not your spouse, then you're not really putting to death the old self.

[11:22] You're letting the old self hang around as a backup plan of sorts. A teacher of mine, the Christian high school I went to, used to often say to the men in the class, the boys truly, look, even if you're on a diet, you can walk past the bakery in regards to looking at attractive women in the mall while his wife shopped.

But I think if Paul were standing next to him today, or back in those days in the classroom, he would take him by the scruff of the neck and shake him and say, no, you can't. It doesn't work that way. You must put out of your mind, out of your life, out of your routine, any impurity, actions, and thoughts that keep you in your old lifestyle's clothing.

If you're struggling with internet porn, or infidelity in your relationships, it will eventually tear apart your relationships. And it cannot be handled by treating it with kid gloves, Paul says.

It must be put to death, so that we can put on Christ as our new identity more fully. We have to take it seriously, as a matter of spiritual life and death, friends.

[12:35] Again, the expulsive power of a new affection. He doesn't start by saying, throw away the old. He starts by saying, you are new, you are renewed, and being renewed in Christ, and he'll repeat that again in a little while in the text we're looking at today.

But knowing where our gaze is, knowing what our identity is, we're called to put off the old, that we might embrace the new, because of the grace already given us in the person, in the work of Jesus Christ.

But Paul doesn't stop here at sexual brokenness. He moves on to speech. And I think we should note here, he is equally concerned with speech, as he is with sexual sin.

It would do the church well to engage this, to sit with this, to actually wrestle with this a little more deeply. It's easy for us to point out sexual brokenness, and to slide poor speech ethics under the rug, or to hide them.

But Paul says both inflict serious damage, not only on the individual, but on the whole community. And in regards to sinful speech patterns, Saul says, put them all away.

[13:47] Anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk. And if these words don't wring your belly, he goes on and says, don't lie to each other. Stop lying.

Why does he say this? Because time and time again, the gospel teaches us, the words of Paul and the other apostles in the New Testament teach us, that the gospel is about truth.

And there is no place for untruths in the Christian community. If we look at the world around us, it is quickly and clearly obvious how rampant anger, wrath, malice, slander, and lying are in a culture

and a world that haven't put off the old self.

And it can be easy for ourselves to get wrapped up in it as well and join in this way of speaking or relating or talking about those who are outside of our circles. Look at all the Facebook warriors out there, both for or against mask wearing, for or against the past or future president, for or against taking a vaccine, for or against our culture tells us we have to be on one extreme or the other in order to fit in.

It shapes our culture's public voice and it is built on the back of slanderous and malicious speech. Think about our political landscape, even in our own lives, regardless of what side you fall on when it comes to political issues.

[15:18] Do you allow yourself to speak, to write, or to think slanderously, maliciously, or angrily about the opposite side? Are you quick to say you couldn't be Christian if, or you shouldn't be Christian if, how could you vote this, how could you stand for that?

On a more personal note, in your personal relationships, relationships, even within the church or your nuclear families, as we find ourselves in holiday season, is there that person who gets talked about in your church circles?

Is there that one crazy aunt, uncle, or in-law who gets put down behind their back on the way to or from Thanksgiving or Christmas or New Year's family get-togethers?

Do you get home from work and tear down your boss or co-workers to your spouse or friends? Paul says, put it away. Give it up.

In order to fit into your new clothes, into your new identity in Christ, that malarkey has got to stop. It has to go the way of the dodo bird. It has to become extinct in your speech patterns and habits.

[16:27] Those things aren't for building up, which is the role of the Christian community, but they are for tearing down, which is the mark of the work of the devil. To tear apart relationships is his ultimate goal.

Between us and God, between us and ourselves, between us and our neighbor and us and creation, that is the devil's work, to destroy those relationships. To be in Christ then is to rebuild them, to build them up, to fortify those relationships and to mend them.

And when we are not intentional about using our language to build one another up, we lend a hand to the opposition's goal. So Paul says, throw off sexual brokenness, that you might put on your identity in Christ more fully and use sexuality in a way that glorifies him, that glorifies his creation, that sees his brothers, his children, your brothers and sisters as image bearers of the king.

Put off slanderous speech and speech habits that are from the old life. Put off tearing people and perspectives down and spend your time building up in love and truth in the gospel.

And yet he says, I understand that while you work on these things, you're not fully there. And that's okay. Take notice to what he says in verse 10.

[17:59] Because if you're anything like me, this is good and necessary news in the context of this passage. In verse 10, it says that although we try, we aren't 100% successful.

In fact, sometimes it feels like we're batting 400, which is Hall of Fame worthy in baseball, but we're not talking about baseball this morning. And yet it seems like it might be asking too much on a given day.

But here's the good news. Here's the good news that Paul reminds us of in chapter 10. This new self, this new identity, the putting off and the putting on is a process.

It's not an event. It didn't happen only at your baptism, only at your confirmation, only at your renewal of confirmation, your renewal of vows. You are not a finished product.

We are not finished products. We are still wet clay in the hands of the great potter. He is fashioning and shaping us day by day. So today, put to death the ways of the world in your life more than yesterday and tomorrow more than today and continue to grow in knowledge.

[19:07] Christians are to be the most critical thinkers as we apply these lifestyle changes. So process the difference that shows up in your lives and how life can and will be with your new clothes, with your new identity fully put on.

When you fall short, remember Christmas. Your identity is given to you, a gracious gift, because God became man to dwell among us, to live as one of us, to die that we might not have to.

It's this identity, rooted in Christmas and fulfilled in the resurrection at Easter, that we are invited to put on Christ when we put to death the old identity of sin and death.

Amen? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, God, we thank you for the gracious gift of Christmas, fulfilled and completed in the work of Easter.

God, we thank you for coming and dwelling among us, to be a God who's not too big or too out there to become man, to take on our sin and our brokenness that we might live and live eternally and live with you.

[20 : 15] Thank you for rebuilding our relationship, for repairing and redeeming us as your creation. God, help us so to throw off the way of the world that we might put on our identity in Christ, that as the world around us sees us, they might begin to ask questions about what makes us so unique, so loving, so gentle, so tenderhearted, and so full of truth.

God, we thank you for the gift of Christ. In your name we pray. Amen.