

Living the new life

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Preacher: Gordon McBirnie

[0:00] Your spirit, our teacher, and your great glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

! If you look at any list of people's favourite books of all time, near the top or at the top, you'll find The Lord of the Rings.

Now, I don't know what you think about these books. I'm a big fan myself, but whether you like them or not, there's no denying they're very popular. And almost, or maybe even more popular, are the films based on the books, which started coming out in 2001.

Now, the actor, Viggo Mortensen, that's him there on the left with the sword, he played a character called Aragorn in the films.

And Aragorn's a very important character in the films. And the actor, Viggo Mortensen, completely immersed himself in his character. He remained in costume the whole time they were filming, many months.

[1:10] He carried that big heavy sword everywhere, so as to become completely accustomed to it. And he even slept out in the wilds, so as to experience a life his character would have.

That's about one step further than I would have gone. But he was extremely dedicated to his role, and in this and other roles that he plays, he's well known for immersing himself in whichever character he has.

He puts on his character like a garment and remains with it until the filming is done. The passage we've read this morning is not at all about method acting or character acting, but Paul's language of putting off and putting on one way of living or another, of deciding who we'll be or what will influence us, can remind us of how these actors inhabit their roles.

And we'll come back to that later this morning. But before we get to that, we need to remind ourselves of something Paul said a few verses earlier in chapter 3, verses 2 to 3.

Set your mind on things that are above, not things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. In the first few verses of the passage, Paul gives us two lists of sins, verses 5 and verse 8.

[2:31] Now the first might loosely be described as things that we do, and the second could be described as things we say. The verses we just looked at from the beginning of chapter 3 gives us a context for what Paul goes on to say in the passage we have read this morning.

The beginning of verse 5 tells us, Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you. Then Paul goes on in the rest of verse 5, come on, to list the things he wants him to put to death.

And these are sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry. Now it might be helpful, as we've done in other weeks, to show another translation, which emphasises a more simple language, and it can help us when we think about how we can recognise these things in our own lives.

And this is from the Easy Read version of the Bible, which I was showing you the other week, as the youth Bibles we've been giving out to young people. So put everything evil out of your life, sexual sin, doing anything immoral, letting sinful thoughts control you, and wanting things that are wrong, and don't keep wanting more and more for yourself, which is the same as worshipping a false god. Now most people agree that although this list contains sexual sins, it shouldn't be taken as a list of the only things that Paul is concerned about, or that these are the only things the people he's talking to should address.

[4:03] Instead, they should be looked on as representative of all sin and wrongdoing that are outside God's purposes for our lives. Paul's giving a few examples, but he doesn't want this to be seen as an exhaustive list.

We can see this by the way he finishes this list, by saying that these things are idolatry, or worshipping a false god. That is that when we wrongly believe that something will give us meaning and satisfaction, apart from God.

Everything in this list, in verse 5, falls under that category, as do all other sins. And the effects of these sins are insidious, like a small patch of rust on your car.

If you don't pay attention to it, then very soon you'll have a big patch of rust. Or seeing the beginning of some weeds growing in your garden, think to yourself, I must get round to pulling them out, and very soon you find you've got a lot of weeds in your garden.

And if we do not put to death, therefore, what's earthly in you, as Paul says, in verse 5, these sins will keep coming back and taking God's rightful place in your life.

[5:16] How we do that is addressed by Paul later on in the passage, and we'll come to that. But that brings us to the very serious sounding verse 6, on account of these, the wrath of God is coming.

Now, we instinctively don't like the idea of God's wrath. It reminds us of a part of God's character, or at least what we think of as God's character, and something we'd rather not think about.

The loving, merciful, forgiving God is the one we like to think about, but the judging, wrathful God is too scary. But Paul is talking here about God's holiness.

It's not that God's malicious or capricious in his anger. His wrath is a necessary reaction of his true holiness, justice and goodness, to wickedness, exploitation and evil.

We know that God's holiness cannot abide sin and wrongdoing. That's why Jesus came to show us God's way, dying on the cross, to bear the sin of the world, rising again in victory over sin and death, so that his shed blood would cover our sin and evil.

[6:28] And so we could know the holy God in a personal relationship. But for those who do not accept this gift, the wrath of separation from God awaits. That's why our mission is so important.

We want as many people as possible to have the opportunity to respond to Jesus' love and be freed from the ultimate consequences of living this sinful, rebellious lifestyle.

And that's where things like our Christianity Explored course will be so useful for us in being able to share the gospel with others. And Paul reminds them, in verse 7, that this was their situation before they accepted Jesus and surrendered their lives to him.

That then brings us to the second list of sins that we find in verse 8 and in the beginning of verse 9. And here again we have it with a simpler language from the ERV, Easy Read version.

But now put these things out of your life. Anger, losing your temper, doing or saying things to hurt others, and saying shameful things. Don't lie to each other. And we saw earlier that these would fall under the category of things we would say.

[7:50] And of course we won't make the mistake of thinking that just because they are words and not deeds that they are not as bad or as harmful. You may remember the nursery rhyme, sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.

I think we've given up now, I hope anyway, trying to convince children that this might be true.

Because we know of course that words can be extremely hurtful and often take much longer to mend than a broken bone.

These sins make peaceful human relationships difficult or impossible and undermine fellowship among God's people. However, there can be a temptation to compare this list to the previous list and wonder if they're not maybe quite as serious.

Despite what we just said about the power of words to hurt, it's a bit of angry talk or a lie as bad as sexual impurity or evil desire. One of the reasons we might think this is that we want to excuse this type of behaviour in ourselves.

The first list sounds bad. We've got no trouble recognising that. But a list of things we say should maybe be on a lower list. Maybe we should, something we should tut at, not put to death as Paul said in verse 5.

[9:05] But of course, that's only one perspective, which is a perspective of ourselves when we sin in these ways. The other perspective is of the person who's on the receiving end of such talk.

That's when it can come home that these sins and the consequences of them can be as life-changing as any other we've talked about. Someone once said, when you pray, get ready to duck.

In other words, God might use you to answer your own prayer or he might use your prayer to point out a shortcoming in your own life. That sort of prayer has consequences and when God works in our lives in response to our prayers, things can happen.

The same will be true if we start to ask God to help us in these sins of what we say. He will answer us and we might find that we come to a situation where we normally allow ourselves to say something that falls under these categories and we'll have to call on God's power through the Holy Spirit to resist.

Of course, that won't be easy because when we're honest with ourselves we quite enjoy this sort of thing. That's why we say it's not just gossip but juicy gossip because we like the taste of it.

[10 : 22] The next three verses, the rest of verse 9 and 10 and 11 are reminding us of something that's both true about us and at the same time becoming true about us.

Since you've taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self which is being renewed in the knowledge and image of its creator, here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free but Christ is all and is in all.

We started thinking about how actors can inhabit a character and said that we'd be coming back to that and as you can see Paul is using this idea of taking off and putting on when talking about the new life we have in Christ.

But notice in verse 9, there we go, he does not say that it's time to put off your old self, he says, since you have taken off your old self, that is, this is something you've already done.

When you become a follower of Jesus, as he says in verse 10, and have put on the new self, he's talking about something they have already done. The old self is who we were before we committed ourselves to Jesus and the new self is the person we became when new life in Christ flooded into our beings.

[11 : 44] It's a moving from death to life. And this is where we see the thing that is both true and becoming true. To belong to Jesus means that what categorised the old self before we walked with God no longer exists.

Instead, we have a new beginning and that will reflect Jesus and his character in our lives. So that is what is true. The part that's becoming true is that although the removal of the old and the replacement of the new has already taken place, Paul adds that the new self is being renewed as we see in verse 10.

So then, what is true of us before God is also being worked out in our lives? There are two words here that are good for us to know. They might be considered Bible college words but they are good words for us to know.

Justification is what Jesus did on the cross. It's God's act of declaring us right with him through Jesus. In this context, that's the part that's already true.

The second word is sanctification. That's the ongoing process by God by which God makes us more holy and Christ-like in our thoughts, actions and character.

[13 : 00] And that's the part that's becoming true. We can perhaps think about this like a skill or a hobby we enjoy doing. You may say that you know how to play golf or crochet or paint pictures but you'd never, I presume, say that you were the finished article and there was no room for improvement.

At least no golfer I've ever spoken to in this church would say that they're as good as they're ever going to get. And it's also true about our new life in Christ. We have the new life but the change is not reflected immediately or all at once in our lives.

If that were so, why would Paul have started this passage with two lists of sins? If we had defeated the influence of the old self completely, there would be no need to talk about wrongdoing because we would not be doing any wrong.

And in this respect, verse 11 tells us that we're all the same. Here then is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Syrian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all.

The key phrase of course in that verse is Christ is all and is in all. And in us all, sorry. We were once in Christ, when we are one in Christ, that strips away the importance of anything else we are.

[14 : 21] Of course, our nationality and ethnicity and so on, these things are important and they don't change, but they no longer matter as much as they might because we are one in Christ and Christ is all and in us all.

In coming to Jesus, we have put off that old self and been clothed with a newness created by God that will reflect the character and likeness of Christ, the one who determines our new identity and whose character we are being renewed to reflect.

Paul now turns from what we must take off to what we must put on. The whole rest of the passage from verses 12 to 17 is one big list of the things we should do that will reflect Christ's character in our lives and draw people to him.

Compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiving each other, putting on love, letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, letting the word of God dwell richly, teaching and admonishing each other in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns, spiritual songs with thankfulness and whatever we do in word or deed, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father.

What a wonderful list and what a guide we could have to live by. We could talk about these things all morning but instead, we're just going to take one from the middle which fixes the rest together over all these virtues put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity.

[15:55] When he says unity, the word Paul used suggests a fastening together of separate items which are then brought together into a unity. If we try to achieve this list through a sense of duty or of guilt or our own determination, we'll fail because we know ourselves too well.

Christ is all and all and in all and it's in him that this love binds together. And it's us as believers through whom that love will be shown to people who desperately need to hear about it.

Because all the things on the list we just looked at are given meaning through love. Not our love, though of course that's part of it, but through Jesus' love worked out in us in compassion, kindness, meekness, patience, etc.

And as seen in our fellowship with followers and in our relations with others. They see something in us which is different because as a believer in Jesus, it's different and that is attractive to them because it draws them to the God that they were created to know.

The love which binds everything together is what attracts them and the pressure is off from us. We are not responsible for bringing people to Jesus. It's Jesus at work in us that does that.

[17:16] Now I said we'd just look at one part from these last verses but just as we finish I want to highlight the phrase in verse 16 let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

This is one of the phrases that we can roll around in our heads and try to think of what it means and most importantly what it means to us. How can we let the word of Christ dwell richly in us day by day?

One person described it as being at home in the gospel story letting it be at home in you so that it may always be ready for use. It's not a bad way to look at everything we've thought about this morning and indeed every time we read God's word.

letting what we hear and see be at home in us and allowing God to shape us through it so that when the time comes we can use it to build up others. Paul sums up everything we have said this morning in verse 17.

So let's give the last word to that verse. Whatever you do in word or deed do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him.

[18:25] Let's pray together. We thank you Lord for your word which you have given us to know you and to live your way. Help us to find out how it may dwell richly in our lives as we seek to grow in you and in your love and to show that love to others.

In Jesus name. Amen.