

Several years ago, when I still lived in Kentucky, I was spending time on a Sunday afternoon with a fellow pastor who served in a different church. We had just been at a picnic with a lot of friends, and as we were driving away, he said, “Hey, there is another church in town that is dedicating their new worship center this afternoon. Do you have time to stop in, say hello, and join in the celebration?” I said, “Sure, that sounds great.” Before long, we pulled into the parking lot and as we walked in, it became glaringly obvious that I was not dressed for the occasion. All the guys were wearing suits and ties and the ladies were wearing beautiful dresses. I was dressed like a guy coming from a picnic: flip-flops, a t-shirt, and cargo shorts (I know, no excuse). I wanted to find a corner to hide in, but I tried my best to not make a big deal about it. When the official service got started, they asked if there were any pastors from other churches in the community who were present. I slouched down in my seat, hoping no one would see me. But then the friend who I came with was given the microphone, and literally called me by name and asked me to stand up. I was so embarrassed, but I thought, it’s okay. What matters is what’s on the inside. But when the senior pastor of the church took the stage, the first thing he said to the congregation was a reminder that we were in the house of God, and when you come into the house of God, you need to dress in a way that honors God, not stroll in like you are coming from a picnic. True story!

Now, I am so happy to be a part of a church where you can dress however you want. If you want to wear a three piece suit, cool! If you want to wear cargo shorts, I’m not going to say the word “cool,” but you are welcome to! At this church, you can come dressed however you want! But with that being said, the Bible does teach that when we place our faith in Christ, we need to clothe ourselves differently than before. The focus of course has nothing to do with our style and everything to do with our sanctification—not our clothing, but our character. When you come to this church, you can wear whatever shirt, shorts, and shoes you want, because what we really want is for the Lord, when he looks at our hearts, to be pleased. That’s the essence of our passage today in Colossians 3:5-11.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the 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.

Paul is saying that since we decided to follow Jesus, our lifestyle has to change. Last week we learned that if we are followers of Jesus, we have died to our old way of life and our new life is now with Christ, in heaven. Because that heavenly reality is now what is most true of us, we have to take off old ways of living and old behavior patterns, so they can be replaced with heavenly ones. The heart behind this passage and the spirit of sanctification has nothing to do with shame-based, legalistic rule-keeping. Instead, it has everything to do with living in alignment with our new identity in Jesus. A life changing exchange has taken place, and because of that, our wardrobe has to change. Aaron Rodgers played eighteen years for the Green Bay Packers. This offseason, he was traded to the New York Jets. For eighteen years, every time he took the field, he wore a Packers jersey. He now has a new team, so he can’t wear his old uniform any longer. The same is true for us when we decide to follow Christ. In our passage today, Paul highlights two primary areas where we need to see a change in our character—sexuality and speech. These aren’t the only areas, but these are major areas of necessary life transformation for followers of Christ.

Let's talk about the first: *following Jesus must result in sanctified sexuality*. Remember what Paul said: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." Let's look at this in greater detail. First, take note that he says we need to "put these things to death." When distorted or misdirected sexuality is present in your life, it's like being in a small room with a viper. You know that snake is venomous—it has lethal capacity. You'd better come up with a plan to kill that snake, or sooner or later, it will kill you. Many in our culture try to deny the truth, but distorted sexuality poses an incredible threat to the quality of your life. Voices who have been harmed by it are beginning to speak out. Billie Eilish is the only woman ever to win all four major Grammy awards. She has had more songs on the Billboard Top 100 at the same time than any woman in history and has broken fifteen Guinness World Records with her music. Suffice it to say she has her pulse on the beat of the next generation. She is not a Christian, but in a 2021 interview she said, "I started watching pornography when I was eleven years old. At the time it made me feel cool. Now I am incredibly devastated that I was exposed to so much porn and think it really destroyed my brain. I'm so angry that porn is so loved, and I'm so angry at myself for thinking that it was okay." Billie Eilish isn't trying to cram morality down anyone's throats. She's trying to say this stuff will ruin your life. That's among the reasons Paul says we have to put it to death. This is not the way of life in Christ.

Paul elaborates on this in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

This is the most direct and dynamic section in the entire Bible about honoring God with our sexuality, and it contains five truths.

**Renouncing distorted sexuality has to be learned.** Paul says that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable. In other words, people don't naturally hit puberty and go through their teenage years, their twenties, and beyond with an instructive bent toward holiness. We all know just the opposite is true. Our natural bent is toward brokenness and destruction, going after whatever our cravings long for. We have to learn to control our bodies; it is a part of spiritual maturity.

**Renouncing distorted sexuality sets believers apart from non-believers.** Paul says it's the pagans, those who do not know God, who are driven by their passionate lusts, but that is not how followers of Christ are to live. A second century letter that described the peculiar lifestyle of Christians says, "They share a common table, but not a common bed." In a world as confused as ours when it comes to sexuality, we need to return to a day when Christians are known for approaching sexuality in a way that is drastically different from the world.

**Renouncing distorted sexuality honors other people.** Paul says in this regard, no one should take advantage of a brother or sister. He says when we sin sexually, we are not only sinning against God and sinning against ourselves, our own bodies, we are sinning against another person. We are wronging them, objectifying them, defrauding them. Whether it is an image on a screen, a fantasy you live out in your mind, or a physical act you commit with a person, it's a real life person, a son or daughter of God, that you are taking advantage of. All such exploitation must be left behind.

**Renouncing distorted sexuality keeps us from divine judgment.** My son Luke is seventeen months old. Sometimes I look at him from across the room and ask him to come to me. He hears me. He understands. But he refuses to take a step. So I asked him, “Do you want a spanking?” And the desire to avoid discipline almost always prompts him to walk my way immediately. I know we don’t like to talk about the Lord punishing people these days, but these are God’s words, not mine. This passage says the Lord himself will punish all those who commit such sins. We want to live in such a way that we receive his commendation, not his wrath.

**Renouncing distorted sexuality is a command from God.** Paul says those who reject this instruction are not rejecting human beings, but God. Someone could hear this teaching about sexuality and say, “Who cares what that pastor thinks? I’m going to live how I want to live. Who cares what that church teaches? I am going to live how I want to live.” Paul says, be careful. You are not rejecting a person; you are rejecting God himself. If there is anyone who wants what is best for us, whose voice we should always desire to listen to, trust, and follow, it is his.

The harsh and sad reality is that distorted sexuality is everywhere these days. Every person who has entered into young adulthood has wrestled with sexual desires and sexual sin. But it seems to be as widespread and publicly celebrated as at any time in recent history. I was listening to a pastor who was a part of the revival that took place at Asbury in February of this year. He said over the course of sixteen days, he had dozens and dozens of young men come up to the front of the chapel to ask for prayer. He said the first thing every one of them—every single one—asked for was freedom from addiction to pornography. He said he keeps getting calls, five and six months later, from young men saying, “I haven’t looked at it a single time since then. I haven’t even had the desire.” When we call out to God and are desperate for him, chains that we thought were so powerful we would be shackled for the rest of our lives can be broken in a matter of seconds under the weight of God’s glory and grace. I pray that will be the testimony of many today.

This is not a place for shame when it comes to sexual sin. There is no finger pointing of condemnation, only an invitation to come into the presence of Jesus, where you can find freedom and strength. During Jesus’ earthly ministry there was a time, at a party with a lot of religious people, where a woman who lived a life full to the brim of sexual sin approached him and expressed in the best way she knew how that she trusted Jesus and wanted to honor him and follow him. The religious leaders who were there and saw it said, “The fact that Jesus is talking to this sexual sinner is proof that he is not the Messiah.” Jesus said, “You’re wrong. Yes, this woman committed many sexual sins, but in my presence, every single one of them has been forgiven.” And if you come to Jesus today like she did, with love, trust, and devotion, the same will be true of you. If you are here today and you are weighed down by sexual sin, the safest place in the world for you is on your knees with a contrite spirit before the throne of a merciful savior. He will look at you with love, show you the scars on his hands and feet and side and say, “Because I was put to death for that sin, it’s time, with the help from the Holy Spirit, to put that sin to death.” It’s time to take off those grave clothes.

That’s the first of two areas of holiness. Following Jesus must result in sanctified sexuality. Second, *following Jesus must result in sanctified speech*. Look at the words Paul uses: “Now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other” (3:8-9). We could dive deep and analyze all six of these commands, but we would end up missing the forest for the trees. Paul is saying that since we died to our old way of life, our old way of speaking and communicating needs to be put to death, too. We need to take it off. This includes everything from profanity and off-colored jokes to deceit and unkind words. That kind of speech has no place in the life of a believer who has been united with Christ.

I remember when I was in college being around a group of four or five friends my age and telling a joke that lacked a little bit of class. It wasn't from the gutter, but neither was it pristine. I looked around to see my friends laughing, and I noticed that the president of our college was right behind us, clearly within ear shot. I stopped laughing. If I instantly wanted to elevate my language in the presence of a person I respected, how much more so should I want to elevate my language in the presence of a holy God who I respect.

The Holy Spirit certainly wants us to avoid crass joking, profanity, and other base forms of speech, but the language that grieves God's heart the most is when we speak critically and judgmentally of other people. Sadly, there have been seasons of my life when this was far too common for me. I can vividly remember a time, years ago, when I was meeting with a friend at a Panera. My friend had a kid in the children's ministry of his church and was clearly not happy with the way the children's ministry was going. He offered very harsh critiques against the leader of that ministry. Instead of being silent, or raising the tenor of the conversation, I joined in and fanned the flame a little bit. We ended up moving on to other things. Fifteen minutes later said goodbye, and as I walked out it was only then that I noticed that the wife of the person we were talking about was in the booth directly behind us. How long she was there, I don't know. Whether or not she heard our words, I don't know. But I can tell you this much: my stomach dropped. I felt about as big as an ant. I would have given anything to go back in time and take careless, unkind words away. If I felt that conviction because I became aware that the person's wife must have heard those words, how should we feel once we realize that every negative, careless, and critical word we ever speak about someone is heard by their Father in heaven, who created them, loves them, and died on the cross to save them?

This is not just wisdom from Colossians, this is the thrust of all of God's word:

- “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless” (James 1:26). As followers of Christ, we're not trying to be religious goody-two-shoes who are tight lipped and never have any fun. Rather, we want the quality and content of our words to show that our relationship with Jesus has changed us to the core.
- Jesus said, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34 ESV). When anger, slander, profanity, and deceit come out of our mouths, it's not a self-control problem; it's a heart problem. That came out of us because that's what's inside of us. We need to let God transform our hearts so that the words we speak enrich and encourage those who hear them.
- “The tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 18:21). Because God has given us new life in Jesus, we want our words to give life to others, too.

Today's passage in Colossians ends in the most inspiring way. Paul reminds us of the reason we are supposed to have sanctified sexuality and sanctified speech: “You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the 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” (Colossians 3:9-11). Paul says the reason the bar has been raised in these areas isn't because all of a sudden morality means more to you; it's because you have put on Christ. Now “there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free.” These used to be the central hallmarks that defined a person's life—their ethnic background, their skin color, their country of origin. A quick glance: a White woman from Europe, a Black man from Africa, an Asian kid from China. Paul says that once someone becomes a Christian, though those distinctions may still technically be true, they no longer become the most prominent attributes that define us. Instead of being known by our ethnicity or nationality, our skin color, height, or gender, we're known by Jesus. Christ is all and is in

all. We put on the new nature. We put on Christ, and if we surrender our sexuality and our speech to him, when people interact with us, they'll see him.

In Matthew 22 Jesus tells a story about a king who threw a wedding party for his son. The wedding party is an illustration of life in God's kingdom. The first group of people who were invited didn't want to come, so the invitation went out to everyone in order that the wedding party would be full, which is a description of the Jewish race rejecting Jesus, resulting in the entire world being able to hear about him. So now, everyone can come into the party; everyone can be a part of the kingdom of God, the family of God. That's incredible news! But look how Jesus ends the story in Matthew 22:11-13: "When the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless." He was invited to the party, but he wasn't dressed right; he wasn't wearing the right clothes. He thought he could be a part of the celebration centered around Jesus without putting on the righteousness of Jesus. "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" If we truly want to be a part of the kingdom of God, it's not enough to accept the gospel message, confess the name of Jesus, and technically know that our identity and new life is found in him; we have to dress for the occasion. When it comes to our sexuality and our speech, we have to take off the old nature, and put on the nature of Christ.