

# In Christ: Putting Off and Putting On

Colossians 3:1-15

## Topical Arrangement of Colossians 3:1-15

seek the things that are above  
Set your minds on things that are above,  
not on things that are on earth  
Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:  
sexual immorality,  
impurity,  
passion,  
evil desire,  
and covetousness,  
which is idolatry.  
6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming.  
But now you must put them all away:  
anger,  
wrath,  
malice,  
slander,  
and obscene talk from your mouth.  
9 Do not lie to one another  
Put on then  
compassion,  
kindness,  
humility,  
meekness,  
and patience,  
13 bearing with one another  
and, if one has a complaint against another,  
forgiving each other;  
so you also must forgive  
And above all these put on love  
And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts  
And be thankful.

If then you have been raised with Christ, ,  
where Christ is,  
seated at the right hand of God.  
3 For you have died,  
and your life is hidden with Christ in God.  
4 When Christ who is your life appears,  
then you also will appear with him in glory.  
7 In these you too once walked,  
when you were living in them.  
8 seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices  
10 and  
have put on the new self,  
which is being renewed in knowledge  
after the image of its creator.  
11 Here there is not Greek and Jew,  
circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian,  
slave, free;  
but  
Christ is all, and in all.  
12 as God's chosen ones,

holy and beloved,  
(Forgive) as the Lord has forgiven you,  
14 (Love) which binds everything together in perfect harmony.  
15 (Peace) to which indeed you were called in one body.

For the past several weeks, we have been exploring what it means to be “in Christ”. Union with Christ is a gift, flowing entirely from God’s love, and is received by faith alone in Christ alone.

It is God’s gift for everyone who believes.

In Colossians 3, Paul begins to flesh out how being “in Christ” influences our ongoing pursuit of holiness. Every Christian is called to pursue holiness. God is holy, and His goal for every one of His children is that they would be holy as He is holy. God’s holiness is nothing less than perfection.

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus taught, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Later on in Matthew 19, Jesus exposed the imperfection of a “rich young ruler” who thought that his own goodness would be enough to earn himself salvation. After that man walked away in sadness, Jesus’ disciples asked him, “If such a fine man is not saved, “Who can be saved?”

<sup>26</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Essentially, Jesus is teaching His disciples that only through a living union with Him is salvation possible. In John 15, Jesus teaches the same basic truth.

**John 15:4-5** <sup>4</sup> Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Apart from Christ, you can do nothing!  
In Christ, you will bear the fruit of holiness.

Any and all true growth in holiness is the result of your union with Jesus Christ. The moment you detach your pursuit of holiness from your union with Christ, you will begin to establish a “man-made... a self-made” religion.

We must all be engaged in a life-long pursuit of the perfection of God’s character. But we must continually remind ourselves that we do not pursue perfection alone.

Jesus Christ is with you, and in you, every step of the way.

Read Colossians 3:1-15.

You have with you a topical arrangement Colossians 3:1-15.

First, we will paint the picture of perfection.  
Then, we will explore what it looks like to pursue perfection “in Christ.”

The pursuit of perfection is divided into two basic activities: Putting off and putting on.  
There is evil that must be removed from your life.  
And there is good that must be acquired.

The good that must be acquired, Paul summarizes as “things that are above.”  
Things that eternally exist in God’s presence.  
And the evil that must be removed, Paul summarizes as “things that are on earth.”  
Things that belong to this present world alone.

seek the things that are above  
Set your minds on things that are above,  
not on things that are on earth

The pursuit of perfection begins with a change of focus. You must get fixed in your heart that your greatest ambition in life must be to seek to be like God.

Holiness is more than rules. Holiness is the personal character of God our Father, and of His Son Jesus Christ.

How about you today?

Is your heart fixed upon the goal of your character perfectly reflecting the character of God?

The fact that Paul must exhort the Colossian believers to “seek” and to “set their mind” upon the things above assumes that they are struggling to do so.

Does your attitude need an adjustment?

Have you forgotten, or ignored, the true goal of your life - to be “like your heavenly Father”?

The goal is not to be kinda good.

The goal is perfection, to dwell eternally with God in His kingdom with all of God’s people.

In order to be perfect, you must put to death the evil that exists within you. The truth is that every believer continues to have within them a desire for evil. And every believer must throughout their lives struggle to subdue these desires and make them obedient to Christ.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you:

sexual immorality,  
impurity,  
passion,  
evil desire,  
and covetousness,  
which is idolatry.

It is not as if sexual passion is the only category of sin. But the truth of the matter is that God has designed sexual pleasure to be one of the strongest cravings of your heart. In addition to the physical pleasure of sex, I would also include the seeking of romantic love.

Both sexual pleasure and romantic love are designed by God and can be enjoyed in this life. But these powerful yearnings can often become “all consuming”. And in the passionate hunger for a better experience, we can turn them into idols.

God has designed that sexual pleasure and romantic love should be contained within the covenant bond of marriage between one man and one woman.

The experience of sexual pleasure and romantic love can often be lacking in marriage. Instead of submitting your desires to God, and striving to sacrificially love your spouse, the temptation is to leave your spouse in pursuit of that for which your heart craves.

On the one hand, do not be surprised to discover the seeds of sexual impurity or romantic craving within your heart. We should not have an expectation that true Christians will never “feel” this way.

If a Christian should “never” feel this way, then Paul would not have to give the command to put these evil desires to death. They just would not exist.

No, the truth is that this struggle is ongoing, even lifelong. It can exist in your heart even if you have a healthy marriage. But it will likely be stronger if you are struggling in a difficult marriage.

And those of you that God has not yet provided a spouse, the struggle can be just as real.

If thinking that we can entirely rid ourselves of evil desires is unhealthy, it is equally unhealthy to embrace those desires as good.

It is our lifelong duty to put these desires to death.

Paul focuses here on the passions of romance. But the same principle applies to all our desires. We might crave comfort, or the praise of others, or things, or accomplishments, or security... the list goes on. When we set our hearts on earthly pleasures above our zeal to be like God, we are committing idolatry.

**1 John 2:15-16** <sup>15</sup> Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world- the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions- is not from the Father but is from the world.

The placing of the pleasures of this world as more important than becoming like God is the essence of sin. And...

<sup>6</sup> On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

I have not yet entirely “put off” my sin.  
Some days, I wonder how much progress I have made.  
But passages like this remind me to remain in the fight, to not check out.

Before we move on... Just to be clear: The enjoyment of life’s pleasures is not the issue. The issue is our heart ever craving for more. We are not content with what God gives us. And we refuse to submit our desires to Him, trusting that He knows best in how to give good gifts to His children.

Paul continues...

But now you must put them all away:  
    anger,  
    wrath,  
    malice,  
    slander,  
    and  
    obscene talk from your mouth.

This second list of vices that must be put away accentuates the importance of living in community with the rest of the Body. This is a list of sins that you commit against others in the Body of Christ. I suppose that they can be committed if you live in isolation. But the more time you spend with someone, the greater potential to commit these sins.

Much of sanctification is subduing yourself.

But there is a whole other dimension of sanctification that is concerned with how you react to the behavior of others.

Again, Paul assumes that this list contains sins that the Colossians are currently fighting. They have not mastered them yet, or he would not have had to exhort them.

He begins with anger.

Anger towards another person occurs when they act in a way that is beneath our expectations of them. Someone is rude to us. They are inconsiderate. They don't behave as we think they should. They disappoint us. In some way, we are robbed of our peace or happiness. Anger is the emotion that wells up inside of us in response.

Anger leads to wrath. We desire to in some way make the person that has angered us pay. We believe our anger is justified. The one who has robbed us of peace and happiness must themselves have peace and happiness taken from them.

Related to wrath, is malice. Malice is a general desire for something bad to happen to happen to the one who has hurt us.

Slander is a form of malice.

When we slander someone, we are intending to hurt them by destroying their reputation.

In slander, we begin to impute terrible motives to the actions.

We assume the worst about the person.

We want others to feel about the person as we feel.

The obscene talk is most likely related to tearing down another member of the body of Christ.

Sure, they have disappointed you.

But their behavior does not justify your sin.

God does not ignore evil.

But consider how He treats you.

Does He slander you before others?

Does He hope for evil in your life?

Even when He disciplines us, His motivation is not malicious. He seeks to build us up.

If your goal is to be "like your heavenly Father," then struggling to put off these attitudes must be your goal.

As with any sin, do not be surprised when these sort of thoughts and feelings rise up within you, even after years of being a Christian.

The practice of "putting off" our sin is lifelong.

Regular admission of the evil within us to God is fundamental to our putting sin to death. The regular practice of admitting to God the evil that He already knows is healthy. As we confess our sins to Him, He dispenses grace that He has purchased for us on the cross.

<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Confession of our sin to God is more than getting things off our chest. As we humble ourselves before God, God is faithful to forgive and to cleanse.

The next command...

<sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another

... applies in many areas. God is truth.

But one particular way that we lie to one another is to never admit that we sin. I am not saying that we need to open up to everyone the darkest secrets of our souls. That can become unhealthy very quickly. But we should make clear in our conversations to others that we are still struggling with sin. We should not purposely give the impression that we are better than we are.

This is a form of lying to one another.

The regular experience of grief and sorrow over our sin, and the confessing of that sin to God, is healthy and normal to the Christian life.

Putting to death and putting off are lifelong struggles.

They involve the submission of our inner desires to God.

And they involve responding to the failures of others in a way God responds to our failures.

Getting rid of the evil within us is only half the battle.

Perfection requires positively acquiring the virtues that God possesses.

Put on then

compassion,

kindness,

humility,

meekness,

and

patience,

<sup>13</sup> bearing with one another

and, if one has a complaint against another,

forgiving each other;

so you also must forgive

And above all these put on love

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts

And be thankful.

Compassion is deep-down in your gut feelings of sympathy for another person. One translation says, "bowels of mercy". These feelings may arise when someone is suffering through no fault of their own. But they also may arise when the person's suffering seems justified by their sin.

God demonstrated this sort of compassion for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

If you want to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect, then you must strive to have compassion for others.

If you do not currently feel compassion for others, confess your lack of compassion to God. Admit to Him that you do not possess compassion.

Very much related to compassion is kindness. Rather than being short with the imperfections of others, you act towards them with generosity and gentleness. You are not harsh.

To the world, compassion and kindness are considered signs of weakness.

We must be willing to be misunderstood as weak if we desire to be like our God.

It is ironic that the world will disdain us for being compassionate and kind, but then will turn around and slander God as being harsh and unconcerned.

God is full of compassion and kindness. We must strive to emulate him in this.

Humility is a quality that seems appropriate to us who are weak and sinful. But Paul places humility in the list of positive qualities that God possesses.

God's brand of humility does not arise from weakness and imperfection. God is humble because even in His own greatness, He made Himself a servant. Jesus Christ came not to be served, but to serve.

Everywhere you turn in this world, people strive to get others to serve them. Jesus lived His life to serve. This is the essence of God's humility. God stoops down to us and humbly cares about our welfare.

When you consider the interests of others as more important than your own interests, you are displaying the humility of God, and of Christ.

Very close to humility is meekness.

Meekness is strength that accommodates the weakness of others.

As two oxen are yoked together, they must learn to pull in tandem with one another.

The weaker of the two cannot rise to the strength of the stronger. But the stronger can hold himself back to keep in step with the weaker.

Those who are meek are willing to do this.

The world says, "Keep up if you can."

Meekness sacrifices personal achievement out of true love of someone else.

Meekness must be a virtue that we strive throughout our lives to put on.

Patience is next. Sometimes translated long-suffering.

While we must continually hope for growth in ourselves and others, we must learn to be patient when that growth is slow in coming.

The wheels of sanctification turn very slowly. We get frustrated, both with ourselves and with others.

But God is patient with you. I hope you believe that.

If God fixed you immediately, you would not get to see His incredible patience.

And one reason why God does not more quickly fix the people around you is that He wants you to display patience to them.

13 bearing with one another  
and, if one has a complaint against another,  
forgiving each other;  
so you also must forgive

The failures and imperfections of our brothers and sisters in Christ are opportunities for us to become more like Christ. When you know how a person ought to act, and yet they continue to fail to act as they should, you must learn to bear with them. That means that you must learn to endure the difficulties that arise from their imperfections.

We want change. And we want it now.

God gently tells us that He has perfectly designed the imperfections in those around you for your good, to forge His character in you.

Sometimes the imperfections of character become more serious. They rise to the level of complaint. But even when you must confront the sin in others, you do so with a heartfelt desire to forgive. Of course, if when confronted, the person refuses to admit any wrong, then true reconciliation cannot occur. But forgiveness and reconciliation remain your desire.

Paul finishes out his picture of perfection with three brief statements.

And above all these put on love  
And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts  
And be thankful.

Much could be said about each of these.

But I hope that you are beginning to see the magnitude of what it means to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

I hope that you see that there is room for improvement in every one of us.

I hope that you see that emulating God is far more than being morally right.

And most of all, I hope that you see that true "God-likeness" is utterly impossible left to ourselves.

Self-made religion can never produce this sort of perfection.

One reason for maintaining perfection as the goal is to keep us from thinking that we can reach it in our own strength.

To be a healthy church we must keep the ideal of perfection before us.

But, as a healthy church we should also remember that as members of God's Church we are still far from reaching the goal.

**Philippians 3:12-14** <sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

But how do we press on by faith and not by our own strength.

First, you must know that it is not so much by how you feel as by the effects produced.

When the fruit of your pursuit of perfection leads you to pride and a critical spirit and looking down on others, something is wrong.

But you should not judge yourself based upon your present feelings. I remember being taught that if I was walking by the power of the Spirit, obedience should come more naturally, almost effortlessly. That



is definitely not my experience. I think that it may very well be that when I feel like my feet are stuck in mud that the Spirit may be doing His best work.

What I am about to tell you will not enable you to make sanctification easy.

But I do believe it will keep you in the fight.

And I do believe it will help you to take much of your focus off yourself.

It should inspire hope.

It should increase the patience you have with yourself and towards others.

And, when you notice some progress being made, it should result in thankfulness, and not arrogance.

The way to pursue perfection by faith is to embrace the reality that God has united you to Jesus Christ. And to meditate on the various implications of this union.

Our union with Christ is both legal and spiritual.

We are united to Jesus as our covenant head. This is a legal bond.

But we are also united to Jesus spiritually and mystically. There is a real, yet unseen, connection between us. Jesus is present with us, and we are present with Him.

We do not make this union true by how strong we believe it. That would make faith itself the union that we have with Christ. When you receive Christ, when you believe in Him, the union occurs. But our faith is not itself the union.

This is important. Otherwise, the focus would always be on ourselves, and the strength of our faith. God legally adopts us as His own and the Holy Spirit truly and really effects a union between Christ and His people, both individually and corporately.

What are the effects of this union?

What can we objectively say is true because of this union?

I am not placing these in any logical order. I am only following the order given in Colossians 3.

1. You have been raised with Christ.

If then you have been raised with Christ, ,  
where Christ is,  
seated at the right hand of God.

Wherever Jesus is, there you are.

As we speak, Jesus is seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly throne room.

Union with Christ means that means that you are currently there with Him.

What does this mean for your pursuit of perfection?

It means that currently, as we speak, you are already sharing in the perfection of Jesus Christ.

You have not only been declared righteous – which is absolutely awesome in its own right.

But you currently united to the righteous character of Jesus as He is reigning in heaven.

What this means is that the pursuit of perfection has already been completed.

As Christians, we are not chasing a goal that we may or may not reach.

The goal is already ours through our union with Christ.

This is more than mental gymnastics. In Romans 6, Paul says that before this union occurred, we were slaves to sin. Now, we are slaves of righteousness.

We are united to Jesus and the same victory that he won over sin as He walked this earth, is now being dispensed to us.

This means that no matter where you are in the process of sanctification, you can be confident that He who began a good work in you will carry it to completion... perfection.

Knowing this enables us to continue fighting with confidence.

But it also helps take the burden off ourselves.

We don't live in constant fear.

Instead, we can have a deeper assurance even in our failures that God is continuing to work.

2. You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

3 For you have died,  
and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

4 When Christ who is your life appears,  
then you also will appear with him in glory.

Often, when we read "you have died" we think experientially that we have died to sin.

God has already stuck his sword into my sinful heart and it is no longer beating.

But if that were the case, why would we still have to spend our whole lives "putting sin to death"?

Each of you knows that the desires of your sinful heart are still very much active within you.

Do not be deceived into thinking that if these desires are powerfully working within you that you must not be united to Jesus. Or that you must not be saved.

Paul combines "you have died" with "and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

If he were thinking of the active work of the Spirit within your soul, he would not speak this way.

He would have said something like, "you have died, and the Spirit is right now producing new life in you.

Paul does say this very thing in other places.

But here he says "your life" is hidden with Christ in God. What does that even mean?

It only makes sense as you ponder your union with Christ.

Currently, I can talk about your union with Christ. But it is hidden from you.

Just as the Messiah was hidden in heaven until the Incarnation, so "your life" is hidden with Christ now in heaven.

People cannot see openly this union. You may even hear me speaking and think, "what a bunch of hogwash." But when Jesus returns on that final day, His union with His entire Body will be brought out into the open for all to see.

At that time, all who are in Christ will be openly united to Him in His glory... His perfection.

As Christians, you are living here on earth. But your "life" is kept safe with Christ in heaven.

One way to think of your death is to see it as a legal severing from Adam. You were born with a sinful heart because of your union with Adam. But now that you are united to Jesus, your union with Adam has been severed.

But you can also think of your death in terms of the realm to which you belong. Before your union with Christ, you belonged to this world and were under the authority of Satan and his minions. Now, you have been transferred into Christ's kingdom, the new creation. You no longer belong to this world. You belong to Christ's New Kingdom.

No matter how much you may feel like your sinful struggles define who you are, they do not. You have been entirely severed from all your sin, just as assuredly as when a person dies physically, they are no longer joined to this world.

You are not a sinner who is trying to become a saint.  
You are a saint who is trying to bring their current behavior into agreement with their new identity in Christ.

Every quality that you must put off or put on is already yours in Christ.  
If you are on a journey to perfection, through union with Christ, you have already arrived at your destination.

When you go on a trip, you hope to arrive safely at your destination. Imagine yourself traveling somewhere for the holidays. On the trip, your vehicle breaks down. You begin to fear whether you will even make it to where you are going.

After much struggle, the vehicle gets fixed and you arrive safely.  
Now that you are there, how do you feel?  
Hopefully happy and relaxed.

What if in the midst of sitting on the side of the road with a broken down car, you were also comfortably sitting by the fireplace at your destination?

How would that affect you as you are sitting by the road?  
You would not think that did not need to work to fix the car.  
But you would have a greater assurance that the car would indeed get fixed.

This is how union with Christ helps us in our pursuit of perfection.  
It may feel like we are never going to get there.  
But the truth is that we are already there.

### 3. You have put off the old self.

Is it not odd that in the same passage where Paul commands us to put off sinful practices, he then states that they have already "put off the old self"?

When you asked Jesus to save you, God united you to Jesus in His death.  
Therefore, simply by trusting in Christ for salvation, you have already put off the old self.

It wasn't really you doing the putting off. You simply believed in Jesus.  
Through your union with Jesus in His death, the fullness of putting off sin is yours already.



The same truths that I am believing for myself, I am obligated to believe about the rest of the body of Christ.

The Jews often thought of themselves as superior to the Greek believers.

Barbarians were those who could not speak Greek and so were considered to be inferior to the rest of the Greeks.

And Scythians were even below the Barbarians.

But when it comes to our union with Christ, there is no distinction. Every person who is united to Jesus will reflect the perfection of Christ. There are different parts of the Body, but every member of the Body is joined to the head.

Christ is all.

And Christ is in all.

Can you see how this must affect your attitude toward other believers?

Can you see how the love that Christ has for them will inevitably be worked out in us for them?

14 (Forgive) as the Lord has forgiven you,  
15 (Love) which binds everything together in perfect harmony.  
15 (Peace) to which indeed you were called in one body.

All of this leads to a "God-centered" pursuit of perfection.

And because even our repentance and faith are gifts from God's eternal love, even in our constant striving, we find ourselves resting, even basking in God's eternal love for us.

12 as God's chosen ones,  
holy and beloved,

Instead of being driven by fear that God will not love you until you conquer your sin, it is as you enjoy the ocean of God's love for you that you now want to become more like Him.

I hope you realize what a big deal it is that Christ has united you to Himself.

He does not wait for you to become perfect before He allows you in His presence.

It was at your very worst that He joined you to Himself.

"We bought a Zoo"

- Peter MacCready to a lion.
- You do not want to eat me.
- I am full of Scotch and bitterness and impure thoughts.

We often say to God, "You should not want me with you. I am full of evil."

The Apostle Peter felt the same way.

**Luke 5:5-8** <sup>5</sup> And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." <sup>6</sup> And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. <sup>7</sup> They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. <sup>8</sup> But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

The truth is that for those who come to Jesus in faith, your sin does not scare Him away.

If it did, you could never be saved.  
You would remain stuck on the side of the road.

Or you would be like a sailing ship with no wind, stuck in the middle of the Atlantic.

Brothers and sisters, are you believing in Jesus to save you from your sin?

Then, God has united you to Jesus.

And, being united to Jesus, you will reach your destination... because even now, you are already with Christ at your destination.

Amen.