

PERSONAL, PRACTICAL HOLINESS

Colossians 3v1-10

This week, in the last of Kate Humble's series, 'The Frankincense Trail', she arrived in Israel and signed in at her hotel in Eilat - only to find it was Shabbat. Expressing her ignorance of Shabbat the hotel rabbi appeared to explain it to her. She held out her hand to shake his hand but he shrank back. No he couldn't do that. He then took her through the minutiae of what could and could not be done with the lift and the coffee machine and the fridge on Shabbat. In just a few minutes we were given a glimpse of religious rules – precisely what Paul says we've been set free from.

This makes it all the more frustrating that this section of Colossians has been given a misleading heading in the NIV: "Rules for holy living." How could they do that when Paul has just declared that we are no longer living under rules? The ESV Study Bible has "Instructions on Living the Christian Life." The message title I have gone for is: '*Personal, Practical Holiness*'.

In vv5-10 Paul brings specific teaching about two vulnerable areas in many people's lives - sexual weakness and an untamed tongue. Although this was written centuries ago it is still so relevant. It is also one of the apostle's' "no punches-pulled" sections of his letters; very down to earth. And behind his teaching are some keys for *Personal, Practical Holiness*.

¹Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. This is very different from a religion of rules. Paul is saying: Your old life has gone; you now have Jesus' resurrection life in you. You have a redeemed nature and a new identity; you are in Christ. You have a different focus to life – Jesus. And Jesus, in all His glory, is coming back for you – so live your life appropriately.

But Paul is also a realist. Despite all of this - temptation *will* come your way. Depend on it. There is still a battle to be waged. We all still find ourselves, tempted, caught out, and struggling with sin. Someone might say: "*But how can this be if I'm supposed to have a new redeemed nature?*" You mustn't let this confuse you or make you doubt the authenticity of your new life in Christ.

Think about the difference when you face temptation now. Because you have a new nature: you recognise sin as sin. You no longer love it because you long to be more like Jesus. Sin doesn't satisfy you - it leaves you feeling miserable. And there is something else: you are no longer a helpless slave with sin mastering you; you have resources to deal with it – you have the Holy Spirit and the resurrection life of Christ in you.

So, Paul identifies two patterns of behaviour that are no longer appropriate for Christians. They will drag you down and tear a Christian community apart.

1. SEXUAL IMMORALITY

⁵**Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.**

⁶**Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.** More literally – the wrath of God *has come*. – it is already in operation in the havoc that unrighteous sexual practices cause. It's not that sexual sin is highest in list. It is mentioned first because it was so rife in first century in cities like Colosse.

⁷**You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.** Paul addresses three specific areas.

(i) Sexual laxity: **Immorality** (Gk *porneia*;) refers to a wide spectrum of sexual practice outside of marriage – ranging from relations with prostitutes to sex before marriage and adultery. Jesus cut even deeper when he talked about committing adultery in your heart. (Matthew 5v27,28) *Porneia* is also the word from which we get “pornography”. Many people are being trapped today by pornography on the internet. They sit in front of their computer screen and commit adultery in their mind and heart.

(ii) Sexual perversion: **Impurity**: literally “dirty”. i.e. sexual practices which lead to sex being regarded as dirty and to a distorted view of men and women. This is tragic because sex itself is not dirty; it is a gift from God. It is God's wedding gift for every married couple.

(iii) Sexual obsession: **Lust, evil desires and greed which is idolatry**: At first glance the word “*greed*” seems out of place, but not so; it means “the desire to have more.” This is unrestrained sexual appetite. Sex controls and ruins such people. They fill their minds with fantasy images which warp their imagination and inflame their actions. Sex has become their idol – it has taken the place of prominence God deserves.

So, what instruction is there here for us? **Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature**: i.e. be ruthless. Don't entertain it or play with sin. Run from it. Run to God! If you are not ruthless with these things - they will be ruthless with you! Every time you linger on a photo or feast on a lustful image on a screen you receive a wound. Every time you flirt or lower your standards or retreat into a lonely world of sexual excitement you receive a wound; a gap appears in your armour for a poison arrow or sharp sword to penetrate. Will you be ruthless? Let me test you. How do you react to these two biblical texts? First, men: “*I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.*” (Job 31v1) Second, women: 1Timothy 2v9: “*I want women to dress modestly, with decency...*” This is so out of step with popular western culture. But it not enough for men and women, filled with the Spirit and the resurrection life of Christ - to be a little bit different; we need to be radically different. We need to stand out –even if it invites ridicule.

Sexual weakness is not always a matter of lust. Sometimes it is a comfort issue – but it always fails to bring comfort; it brings more pain. So fill your heart and mind with those things that will make you strong. Find your comfort in God.

2. UNHOLY TALK (v8-10)

This is another vulnerable area for many people. **⁸But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other.** This is not about a few words you let slip. Your speech reveals something about your inward condition. Just as a doctor might look at your tongue to get some indication of your health so your speech says something about your heart. Jesus said, *“Out of the heart the mouth speaks.”* Paul uses a succession of words to point to the source of problems with the tongue.

anger and rage: *anger (orge)* is slow-burning and deep rooted; One writer comments: *“What is in view here is such a powerful emotion that only God can be trusted to exercise it fairly.”* (James D.G. Dunn) *Rage (thumos)* is fiery, quick to rise and just as quick to subside; it might be bad temper or a volatile temperament.

malice and slander: It may be gossip, character assassination, spreading some rumour. It may be speaking behind another person’s back or twisting the truth to make someone else look bad. They are words intended to hurt. Maybe we should ask: could Jesus name be associated with these words? Would Jesus Himself be speaking in this way? *“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.”* (3v17)

filthy language: i.e. obscene, shameful talk; this might be coarseness or any conversation that savours of the sordid. Whether at work or school or college, at home or out for an evening with a bunch of friends: *“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt”.* (4v6) It is possible to identify where someone comes from by their accent, language or dialect. So it should be with Christians. Clean speech should mark you out as a child of God.

do not lie to each other: Yes deliberate untruths; but also half-truths and exaggeration which distorts the facts; being “economical with the truth”. Think about it like this: to lie is to resemble Satan who is the Father of lies.

Since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self: This describes a decisive action in your past. It is also the language of taking off one set of clothes and putting on another. It may reflect the practise of the early church. After baptism new believers exchanged their old clothes for a new (white) set of clothes. Paul is saying: “dress appropriately! Get rid of those practices which were part of your old life. Put on those things which go with your new life.” God is now at work in you by the Holy Spirit; you are becoming more like Jesus. It may be painfully slow and gradual but it is obvious to you and to others. It should be visible. So stand back and look in the mirror from time to time. Take a look at the new you - **which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.** Maybe you’ve been to a Hall of Mirrors and looked at your distorted image. That is what sin did to you. But now that you have a new nature the image of God in you is being restored.

John Wilthew. September 2009.

Message Summary

PERSONAL, PRACTICAL HOLINESS

Colossians 3v1-10

In this section of his letter Paul brings specific teaching about two vulnerable areas in many people's lives - sexual weakness and an untamed tongue. And behind his teaching are some keys for *Personal, Practical Holiness*.

Read verses 1-4. This is very different from a religion of rules. Paul is saying: Your old life has gone; you now have Jesus' resurrection life in you. You have a redeemed nature and a new identity; you are in Christ. You have a different focus to life – Jesus. And Jesus, in all His glory, is coming back for you – so live your life appropriately. But Paul is also a realist. Despite all of this - temptation *will* come your way. There is still a battle to be waged. He identifies these two patterns of behaviour that are no longer appropriate for Christians.

1. SEXUAL IMMORALITY:

Read verses 5-7: It's not that sexual sin is highest in list. It is mentioned first because it was so rife in first century in cities like Colosse. Paul addresses three specific areas.

- Sexual laxity: **Immorality** (Gk *porneia*;) refers to a wide spectrum of sexual practice outside of marriage.
- Sexual perversion: **Impurity**: literally "dirty". i.e. sexual practices which lead to a distorted view of men and women. Sex itself is not dirty; it is God's gift.
- Sexual obsession: **Lust, evil desires and greed** (literally "the desire to have more.") **which is idolatry**: This is unrestrained sexual appetite. Sex controls and ruins such people and has taken the place of prominence God deserves.

Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature: If you are not ruthless with these things - they will be ruthless with you! But it not enough to be a little bit different; we need to be radically different. Sexual weakness is not always a matter of lust. Sometimes it is a comfort issue – but it always fails. Find your comfort in God.

2. UNHOLY TALK

Read vv8,9: Your speech reveals something about your inward condition. Jesus said, "*Out of the heart the mouth speaks.*" Paul uses a succession of words to point to the source of problems with the tongue.

- **anger and rage**: *anger* (*orge*) is slow-burning and deep rooted; *Rage* (*thumos*) is fiery & quick to rise; e.g. bad temper or a volatile temperament.
- **malice and slander**: It may be gossip, character assassination, spreading some rumour. It may be speaking behind another person's back or twisting the truth to make someone else look bad. They are words intended to hurt.
- **filthy language**: i.e. obscene, shameful talk; this might be coarseness or any conversation that savours of the sordid.
- **do not lie to each other**: Yes deliberate untruths; but also half-truths and exaggeration which distorts the facts; being "economical with the truth".

Since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self: This is the language of taking off one set of clothes and putting on another. Paul is saying: "dress appropriately! Get rid of those practices which were part of your old life. Put on those things which go with your new life." God is now at work in you. It may be painfully slow and gradual but it should be obvious to you and to others. Stand back and look in the mirror from time to time. Take a look at the new you - **which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.**

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. In the light of Paul declaring that we have been delivered from a religion of rules, what title would you suggest for this passage instead of the misleading 'Rules for holy living' (in the NIV)?
2. What might you say or do to help someone who has been snared by pornography on the internet?
3. What are the big issues behind Paul's words: "*I want women to dress modestly, with decency...*" (1 Timothy 2v9)?
4. "Anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language and lying": what might each of these reveal of a person's inward condition?
5. When you became a Christian what vulnerable area of your life did God get to work on first in you?