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**Colossians 3:1-11**  
**“New Life in Christ, Part I”**

I try to go to the gym a couple of times a week, and it is there, while jogging away on an elliptical trainer, that I watch television, since it's mounted right on the machine. When I was watching it a few days ago, thanks to my chronic channel surfing, I saw the following items: a clip of a Brooklyn congressman screaming on the floor of the House of Representatives, several stock market updates, a short piece on a man being ejected from a Cleveland Indians baseball game for wearing a new LeBron James' Miami Heat basketball jersey, an update on three American servicemen killed in Afghanistan, a commercial to call a law firm if I wanted to sue a blood pressure drug company, and exercises I could do to help get rid of extra pounds put on by pregnancy. (I paid a lot of attention to the last item.) When I returned to the church office, I read Colossians 3: “If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, not the things that are on earth” and I thought, “Yes, that's perfect advice.” I grow weary of the news of this world – the sales pitches, the political games, the unrelenting media circus that claims to provide up-to-date information. I long for the things of faith, feeling and knowing that my life is wrapped up with God in Christ.

The Colossian's scripture exhorts us to “seek the things that are above,” to focus our minds and wills on the fullness of life made known in the resurrected Christ, the next verses contain morality instructions for us – “To Do” lists, or more accurately, “Don't Do” lists for a life of faith. The idea is that we are to strip off our old self and old practices, and then clothe ourselves with a new self, shaped according to the image of God and of Christ, who is all and in all. So I guess that if I want this new life in Christ, I need to concentrate on those “Don't Do” lists, even though my gut tells me that there is something more to the life of faith.

List #1: (Verse 5) says this: *Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).* (Oh dear, it looks like the minister's going to talk about S\*E\*X again...) There's no denying that the first four categories (fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire) are physical in nature. Nor should it be denied that for Paul and the early church, an important mark of the Christian life was to live a life of purity and fidelity, almost a type of ascetic preparation befitting people who expected the imminent return of Christ any day. No partying, no hooking up, no casual affairs, no drunken revelry. But is that what the new life of Christ is really about – a life of renunciation and ascetic discipline?

Remember the last item in that list. It was “greed, which is idolatry.” What is greed? Greed is a covetous desire to possess, desiring something so much that we'll do whatever it takes to get it. It is also an idolatrous desire, for we end up working for and worshiping whatever it is we seek as if it were a god itself. Like wealth. Security. Comfort. Possessions. Power. That's why greed was in this first list – because all the

vices mentioned share the same spirit of grasping idolatry: greed; evil desires that lead us to harm ourselves or others, passion that is heedless of reason, impurity that breaks acceptable rules, and fornication that uses other persons for sexual gratification only, treating them as objects to be manipulated for our own pleasure. That is why the scripture calls us to seek higher things, not earthly things twisted and distorted by idolatry. Yes, there is an inherent beauty and goodness to human sexuality and desire – but not all fleshly desires fit into this category. That which draws us to God is blessed; that which draws us away from God is to be put to death.

The second list of items is in Colossians 3, verse 8: *Get rid of such things as anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive or filthy language.* Again, it sounds like a general “Don’t Do” list. In response we say, “Yes, I promise to try and not be angry at others, not to think bad thoughts about others, not to say bad things or gossip about others, and to control my tongue so I don’t say bad words – and if I do, I’ll put a quarter in the cuss jar so that I’ll remember to clean up my potty mouth.” All these instructions are good and worthwhile, but it is hard to get energized about them. New life in Christ should be something more than just avoiding cuss words, shouldn’t it?

If the first list of items was about not letting our physical natures turn idolatrous, the second list of items is actually about justice and avoiding things that destroy our shared Christian life. Think about it. Anger, wrath, malice, and slander are all emotions seeking to hurt others. By them we injure others’ reputations; we undermine trust; we violate the Golden Rule and work against the common good. These instructions are of first importance for people in the church, who (I’ve heard some say) are no strangers to ill-temperors or gossiping tongues. If we as the church cannot seek justice through our words, through our commitment to peaceable language and respect, how can we be a witness to the world about the new life in Christ? I can’t ask that this sermon redeem every congregation, every backwater preacher, and every late-night television evangelist, because this sermon’s not for them. It’s for us. We are to be salt that hasn’t lost its flavor. We are to be light shining in the darkness, a community of justice reflected in words and deeds. For, if we have been raised with Christ, we are to seek the things that are above, putting off our old nature and clothing ourselves with the new self in Christ.

When my family and I were in Vermont recently, and when the temperature was especially hot, we would drive to a place called Buttermilk Falls – a place where a small river plummeted over rocks to form an icy-cold pool surrounded by big granite boulders just perfect for jumping off. The hot car ride and a walk through the woods to reach the falls were rewarded by this place of refreshing waters, brisk temperatures and splashy entries into an isolated pond. Dogs, kids, and adults alike would swim and cool off until it was time to reluctantly return home.

Is that an appropriate metaphor for the New Life in Christ? Can we think about our old lives of greed and sweaty desires, bad thoughts, bad emotions and bad words, as the time spent hiking in 100 degree heat – while the new self is when we strip down to our bare essentials and jump into the cool, invigorating, life-restoring waters of Christ’s

Baptism Falls? Is faith like a metaphor of being one place – a place of anger, malice, selfishness, and distorted emotions – vs. being in another place – a place of being washed clean, tingling, exuberant life-renewal?

You're going to hate this – but the answer is No, not exactly. And here's why. When we go to Vermont and hike to Buttermilk Falls, it's wonderful and refreshing, but after a while, we leave the swimming hole – and we hike back through the woods and get back in the car, and get sweaty and annoyed and grumpy and become imperfect human flesh all over again. The life of faith should never be set up so that we say "Here's me when I'm being sinful and ugly and not-nice-at-all" and "Here's me when I'm being faithful and considerate and so virtuous that you can almost see my halo." That's why my gut was somewhat uneasy focusing on the "Don't Do" lists in this passage. The easy tendency is to divide our lives into times when we break the rules or keep the rules; when we're sweaty and foul-mouthed or swimming in cool, baptism waters. But that seems to suggest there are times we're close to God and times we're far from God. And when bad things happen, bad medical diagnoses are given, bankruptcies, job losses, or car accidents happen – we are tempted to feel like we're away from God. And that only makes things worse.

Here's the good news of Colossians. It started by saying "*If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and (listen carefully) your life is hidden with Christ in God.*" New Life in Christ means that we, in our entirety, are subsumed into Christ. We are never alone, never forsaken, never distant from Christ – for in Him we live and move and have our being. Why do we put to death fornication, impurity and greed? Because such behavior is destructive to the larger body of Christ to which we fully belong. And why do we get rid of anger, malice and slander? Because such actions are unjust; they harm others in the body of Christ and therefore they have no place in our new life, hidden, subsumed, enfolded in, enlivened by Christ.

If you like the Buttermilk Falls metaphor, then New Life in Christ is not jumping into the pool when you're hot and sweaty. New Life in Christ is emerging from those baptismal waters and never, ever leaving Christ as you walk once more on the shore – as you dry off, drive home, live and breathe and act and pray and share communion as part of Christ's resurrection presence in the world. You live now as part of something much larger than yourself – eternal, omniscient, patient, forgiving, loving. Rest in this good news and seek the things that are above.

AMEN