

Abandoning the False Self

Colossians 3:5-11

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.

⁷These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have

stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

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Last week we focused our attention on our false selves. That part of us that develops naturally in a fallen world and sets our hearts and minds on what we

have, what we do, and what others think of us.

When our identity is founded on things exterior to us, we have to work hard to protect what we have, what we do, and what others think of us. Because these things are so transitory, a life built on our false selves is endless work in an unstable environment.

Fact is: life oriented toward our false self does not get us where we want to go! In moments of quiet, we can hear a voice from within that asks of ourselves: “are we being true, honest,

authentic?” or we are living out of our image of ourselves that we would like to project?

Indicators of false self living can be a general dissatisfaction with our lives or guilt over our private self when at variation with the public image we project. We yearn for a purpose worthy of our life energy and for lives of integrity.

The good news that Jesus brought was that the kingdom of God was at hand. The new life is possible. True, honest and authentic living is possible. That’s the good news. The rest of

the story is that it requires of us a radical change. A simple example reveals our spiritual situation.

Lets say that our goal is to get to Pittsburgh from where we are now, but that our orientation is north. We want to get to Pittsburgh by going north so we could try 28 north, or 79 north or route 8 north but none of those routes will get us there. But we're really determined so we even try some of the back roads, but we still don't get to Pittsburgh by going north even when we try the back roads. But we're REALLY determined so we consider

traveling north by truck or bicycle or foot.

You know that our problem is that we can't get to Pittsburgh from here if we have the wrong orientation. To get to Pittsburgh we must take a new orientation; we must go south.

Paul provides us a list of what we are to abandon, and a careful reading shows that Paul moves beyond outward behaviors to the heart of our false selves from which particular vices emerge. And so he is calling us to abandon certain behaviors and

the false self that gives rise to those actions.

The first list moves from an outward behavior “fornication” to the inner workings that give rise to it: “impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed”.

The second list moves from the internal processes “anger, wrath, malice” and moves to the outward behavior of “abusive speech from your mouth”.

Abandoning our false selves requires that we deal both with *behaviors* and the *being* that gives rise to them.

It is on account of BOTH that the wrath of God is coming.

We should pause to note that God’s wrath is a present issue. Often times we project the consequences for our behaviors as something that will happen in the future. But Paul speaks of it in the present as a consequence for living out of our false self.

Often, we think of God’s wrath as “mean, punitive, vindictive, vengeful, retributive action by an offended deity”.¹ One Biblical

¹ M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., The Deeper Journey, p. 100

teacher puts the wrath of God in helpful perspective.

Consider this situation. We're worshipping not in a sanctuary, but on a rooftop patio. And after worship, you decided to leave, not by the rooftop door, but by walking off the edge of the roof. Would gravity be mean, punitive, vindictive, vengeful?

No. gravity is gravity and you would experience the consequences of living your life out of harmony with gravity.

As Robert Mulholland wrote, "we are created to find our

fullness of life in loving union with God. When we live in such a relationship, our lives are integrated; we possess a deep inner stability and experience wholeness. When, however, we step out of that loving union with God, when we rebel against this essential reality of our being, we begin to experience the disintegration, instability and brokenness that result from uprooting our lives from their true center."²

So, living by our false selves goes against the grain of our creation and brings with it the

² IBID, p. 101

consequences of living out of harmony with the way we were created to be.

Paul wants us to know that we are all affected in this way and so he writes in the plural form, saying, “You [all] once walked in this kind of life....” We cannot say, well those don’t apply to me. In Romans he wrote it memorably, “all have fallen short of the glory of God”.

He mentions particular vices: our broken sexuality, slander, and abusive language and lying.

And he mentions the inner processes from which these behaviors come: “impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, along with anger, wrath and malice.

To be the people we were created to be and who, in Jesus Christ, we can be, Paul writes that we must deal with the old self and its practices.³ What Paul prescribes is to kill off the old self.

That sounds so harsh to us but it confronts the illusion that we can live with who we are if only we will make a few adjustments.

³ Colossians 3:9

Remember that adjustments were not helpful when trying to get south, but only going north.

Paul calls us to a radical reorientation, to kill off the old self, to put to death the old, stubborn and resilient false self.

At my home in Illinois, some ivy grew on the brick by the garage. It was pretty so, for a time, my father actually encouraged its growth. But then he realized that the roots were bearing into the mortar and causing it to crumble. Behind the appearance of the ivy was some destructive behavior! So he cut down the ivy and

pulled it from the ground. But for several years after that, the ivy returned. It took my father several years to finally kill it off.

If we are to abandon our false selves we will need to be committed to abandon our entire false self in whatever forms that we seek meaning from what we have, what we do, and from what others think of us.

Remember Jesus' words: you cannot serve two masters, you will either be oriented to the protective, manipulative, fearful ways of guarding your image, or you can follow Jesus path of

freedom to loving union with God and neighbor.

To paraphrase Jesus, you must choose one orientation: you cannot travel north and south at the same time.

That commitment is essential because there are likely lots of ways that your false self has become habit without you even knowing it.

How often do you experience frustration because what is happening is not oriented to you. Truth is: the false self-centered self runs a lot of our lives.

The commitment to kill off our false self is first. Then we can begin to develop an increasing awareness of ways that we're living from our false self.

One man was waiting for a train at a crowded terminal. When the train arrived, only one car was not filled. He was surprised to see that all of the passengers were on one end of the car. Surprised, that is, until he got on the train. At the other end of the car was a derelict man who had not bathed in some time. And he was sitting in his own vomit. Because of the stench, the

people, including this man, moved away from him.

Several nights later, the man had a dream. In his dream, he was again on that train. As he looked at that homeless man, the man lifted up his face and it was the face of Jesus.

He realized he had been living out of his self-centered self and not done anything to help the man. He realized that Jesus' way would have been to do something in compassion for the man in need. It was for him, an awakening to his false, self-centered self.

What are the ways that I have embraced the idols of what I have, what I do, or what others think of me?

This could be overwhelming. One writer, a monk, has taken the approach of laughing at his false self when he sees it in operation. Whenever he's trying to make something of himself by collecting something, or doing something, or telling others what he's done, he laughs.

It seems a helpful step that we begin to detach from our false self with laughter.

But the detachment we need goes further than laughter. Jesus said that we must die to self if we are going to follow him, and receive the life that he offers.

What does it mean to kill off the old, false self? Does this mean that we stop doing everything that we've been doing?

For most of us, it means that we stop some behaviors and we begin to do what we do for Jesus' sake.

We love one another not to gain their positive opinion or because

they can provide something for me, but because we are created for love.

(Remember that the environment Jesus creates is a community of love where love is a two way street: given and received so there is receiving, but our giving is not to manipulate the other for receiving.)

After we discover how we're living out of the false self, how does one go about killing it off?

One tool may be found in the opening verse of this letter. Paul began with the words, "¹Paul, an

apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God....” It’s an orienting phrase, for his readers, and likely orienting for Paul as well.

He’s writing not because he’s pressing his agenda on a congregation that is resistant of his agenda; he is writing on behalf of Jesus who has called him as an apostle.”

How that can change our perspective!

Henrietta, a mother of Christ Jesus by the will of God to love and encourage her

children after the example of Jesus.

Harry, a brother of Christ Jesus by the will of God called to love his family because when we love God lives in us and God’s love is perfected in us.

Each time you find yourself heading the wrong direction you can read and detach from the false self and reorient to the new self by remembering that you are what you are because of Jesus Christ by the will of God.

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Our commitment to abandon the false self is an important step that allows us to recognize the ways that we are pointing our lives in the wrong direction. When we realize we're heading north when God is leading us south, we can laugh. But it will take our determined reorientation over time to kill off our old self. In it all, we remember that we are what we are by the love of Jesus Christ and the will of God.

Like ivy, the old self is resilient. It pushes us by fear and pulls us by attraction. With Peter and

every Christian who has ever lived, we can pray: “God, help me to love you more than these.”