

How to Mortify Sin

In [Colossians 3:1–17](#), there were young Christians. They converted from paganism into a liberating world of grace. Perhaps they had felt they were delivered, not only from sin's penalty but from its influence. Until sin reared its ugly head again. Having experienced the “already” of grace they were now discovering the painful “not yet” of ongoing sanctification.

Without a firm grasp of Gospel principles, they were at risk of falling prey to false teachers with promises of a higher spiritual life. That was what Paul feared ([Col. 2:8, 16](#)). Holiness-producing methods were popular ([Col. 2:21–22](#)) — and they seemed to be deeply spiritual. But, in fact, “they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” ([Col. 2:23](#)). Only an understanding of how the Gospel works, can provide an adequate foundation and pattern for dealing with sin. This is the theme of [Colossians 3:1–17](#).

First of all, it is important to remember our new identity in Christ (3:1–4). We have a new identity. We are no longer “in Adam,” but “in Christ”; no longer in the flesh, but in the Spirit; no longer dominated by the old creation but living in the new ([Rom. 5:12–21](#); [8:9](#); [2 Cor. 5:17](#)). We have died with Christ ([Col. 3:3](#)); we have even been buried with Christ, (2:12); we have been raised with Him (3:1), and our life is hidden with Him (3:3). Indeed, so united to Christ are we that Christ will not appear in glory without us (3:4).

A believer has been delivered from the dominion of sin and is free and motivated to fight against the remnants of sin in their heart. Know, rest in, think through, and act upon your new identity.

Second, expose the workings of sin in every area of our lives ([Col. 3:5–11](#)). Do not think that we can limit our attack to only one area of failure in our lives. All sin must be dealt with. The manifestation of sin in private life (v. 5), everyday public life (v. 8), and church life (vv. 9–11). We are really dealing with ourselves. We are the problem. Mortifying sin is a whole-of-life change.

Third, practical guidance for mortifying sin. Sometimes it seems as if Paul tells us to kill sin without telling us how. So Christians go to the bookstore looking for “how to” guides. We must take time to think deeply on the scriptures to see what Paul is saying. Notice how this passage helps to answer our “how to?” questions.

1. Learn to admit sin for what it really is. Call it “sexual immorality,” not “a little temptation”; call it “impurity,” not “struggling with my thought life”; call it “evil desire, which is idolatry,” not “ordering my priorities better.” This powerfully unmasks self-deceit—and helps us to unmask sin lurking in the hidden corners of our hearts!

2. See sin for what your sin really is in God’s presence. “On account of these the wrath of God is coming” (3:6). We drag our lusts to the cross, to a wrath-bearing Christ. My sin does not lead to lasting pleasure, but to holy divine displeasure. See the true nature of your sin in the light of its punishment. We think that sin is less serious in Christians than it is in non-believers: “It’s forgiven, isn’t it?” Not if we continue in it ([1 John 3:9](#)). Take a heaven’s-eye view of sin and feel the shame of that in which you once walked ([Col. 3:7](#); see also [Rom. 6:21](#)).

3. Recognize the inconsistency of your sin. You put off the “old man,” and have put on the “new man” (3:9–10). The identity you had “in Adam” is gone. The old man was “crucified with Christ in order that sin might lose its power in our lives” ([Rom. 6:6](#)). New men live new lives. Anything less than this is a contradiction of who I am “in Christ.”

4. Put sin to death ([Col. 3:5](#)). Refuse it, starve it, and reject it. You cannot “mortify” sin without the pain of the kill.

Notice that the *negative* task of putting sin to death will not be accomplished in isolation from the *positive* call of the gospel to “put on” the Lord Jesus Christ ([Rom. 13:14](#)). See [Colossians 3:12–17](#). Sweeping the house clean leaves us open to a further invasion of sin. But when we understand the “glorious exchange” of the gospel of grace, then we will advance in holiness. We not only reject sinful desires and habits, but *exchange* them for Christ-like graces (3:12) and actions (3:13), so that Christ’s name and glory are manifested and exalted in and among us (3:17).