



# Cleaning Up Your Spiritual Environment

## [3:5-9]

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*“Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, . . . and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices” (3:5-9).*

In recent years environmentalists have alerted us to the destructive forces at work in our world. Industries have polluted nearby streams. Factories belch their putrid, acrid fumes into the air, making it dangerous to breathe. Fluorocarbons eat away at the earth’s ozone layer. Environmentalists have worked diligently to warn us of the dangers we are perpetrating against ourselves. But a person’s environment also includes the moral and spiritual climate in which he lives. When that climate is one of sin, human life is being polluted and ultimately destroyed.

In Colossians 3:5-9, Paul identified specific sins which the Christian needs to eliminate from his life in order to clean up his spiritual environment.

### THE CALL FOR CLEANUP (3:5)

Paul began with the call to eliminate contamination in our lives: “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, . . .” (3:5). Other translations capture the force of the original language: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: . . .”

(NIV); “That is why you must kill everything in you that belongs only to earthly life” (Jerusalem Bible). A resurrection lifestyle begins with the eradication of the old lifestyle in a practical way. We must die to some things.

In 1984 Mary Lou Retton captured the hearts of Americans with her incredible acrobatics in the Olympic Games. As Americans watched Mary Lou Retton that week, the question on everyone’s lips was “How does she do that?” Here is the answer: She died to many activities to become a great gymnast. While others were playing, she was working out. To succeed she could not afford to waste time and energy on that which detracted from her goal of becoming a world class gymnast. She devoted her life to *one* thing and died to everything else.

The Christian must do the same thing. In order to succeed in the resurrection lifestyle, the Christian must die to everything that detracts from that goal. For Christians, the old way of living was buried in the past. Now we must devote ourselves to the one new way of living that is in Jesus.

Paul employed the metaphor of slavery to communicate this truth: “. . . but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, . . . For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace” (Romans 6:13, 14). This is not an appeal for us to earn eternal life. The *fact* of our new life is a reality. We have already died to sin and have received new life in Christ (see 3:3). Therefore, we do not need to

attempt to achieve it. However, there must be *follow-up*. Our position as children of God must be made manifest in our practice.

Martin Luther once remarked, "I went down to the river to bury the old man only to discover that he could swim!" The flesh will not give up without a fight. It is one thing to receive new life from Christ; it is another to work that new life into our daily experience.

Developing a resurrection lifestyle begins with a once-for-all putting to death of the old way of living. Paul used an aorist active imperative verb. Unlike a present imperative which would suggest a continuing process, an aorist imperative means point action. This is a one-time act. "Put to death," he says, "everything from your former way of living that contaminates your spiritual environment." You should not have to decide every morning, "Am I going to do what is right today?" That decision was made once for all when you surrendered your life to the Lord.

That is not to say that the Christian will not have any struggles because he will. But the struggles will be to break old patterns of living and replace them with new, righteous ones.

### THE CATALOGUE OF CORRUPTION (3:5, 8, 9)

Paul next turned to a catalogue of earlier corruptions. Two lists are given, one in verse 5, the other in verse 8. The first tends to be more personal in nature, the second more social in nature. The former catalogue of sins begins with acts and moves toward motivations; the latter begins with attitudes and moves toward actions.

#### Personal Sins

Notice the catalogue of personal sins: "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry" (3:5).

The risen life begins with cleaning out every trace of immorality. Translated "fornication" in the KJV, this is a reference to all forms of sexual activity outside the marriage relationship. In the ancient world, the sexual impulses were something to be gratified, not controlled. God says they are to be gratified, but only in the realm of marriage. To seek fulfillment elsewhere is immoral and belongs to the old way of life.

Impurity embraces every exhibition in thought,

word, or deed of a corrupted spirit. The term is often connected in the New Testament with the preceding word and, therefore, carries with it the idea of a sexually perverted outlook on life.

Where do immorality and impurity originate? They flow out of a corrupted heart—one filled with defiled passions and evil desires. The bottom line is that it all comes out of greed, idolizing that which is forbidden by God. Whenever a man says, "I want what I want, regardless of what God says," he has through his greedy spirit shown himself to be an idolater, a worshiper of the creature rather than the Creator.

Thus, Paul begins with the deed and ends with the problem that is at the heart of it all. How are we to put these sinful actions and attitudes to death in our lives?

If greed is the fundamental problem, wanting what is not rightfully ours, the solution is to replace greed with contentment: "Godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. . . . And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content" (1 Timothy 6:6-8). A commitment to simplicity is the key to conquering a covetous spirit. Much of what the world calls "necessities" are actually luxuries. Arthur Gish observed, "We buy things we do not want to impress people we do not like." Contentedness comes from focusing on what we are blessed with, not by concentrating on what we do not have. It comes by setting our minds on things above.

#### Social Sins

Paul's second list is a catalogue of social sins, sins that grow out of our relationship with others: "Put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, . . ." (3:8, 9).

The expression "put aside" in the Greek was used to describe taking off one's clothes. Therefore, we read of those who were about to stone Stephen: ". . . the witnesses *laid aside* their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58; emphasis mine).

Imagine a mechanic coming home in the evening, taking off his grimy uniform, stepping into the shower, getting out, and putting back on that dirty uniform! How ridiculous! Yet how many Christians do something similar? Scrubbed clean by the blood of Jesus, some Christians will return to dressing in the dirty rags of the old life.

Paul says to get rid of them!

What old “clothing” should be put aside? Start with “anger,” that deep down, smoldering, resentful bitterness that keeps a record of wrongs. Next is “wrath,” the sudden and passionate outburst of that smoldering anger.

If anger does not give way to wrath, it gives birth to “malice.” This is a silent, hidden disposition of spite that takes revenge in secret. More than a spirit of hostility, it is a desire to hurt someone else to get even.

Next is “slander.” If someone pulls in front of you on the highway and you shout, “You stupid jerk!”, that is the slander spoken of in the Bible. Attacking another’s character is a sin to be cast aside.

Fifth is “abusive speech.” Some versions have “filthy language,” and it is just that: dirty jokes, obscene language, four-letter words, suggestive innuendoes. Any dialogue that pollutes human communication is not fitting for the spiritual wardrobe of the risen life.

The final dirty garment is “lying.” This involves telling someone you will do something for him and then deliberately not following through. It can mean vowing to be true to another “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer” and then bailing out of the relationship when you are not comfortable with it any longer. These are all forms of this sin.

This is only a “window display” of the dirty garments the Christian is to avoid. A whole warehouse full of items could be identified: envy, strife, deceit, gossip, arrogance, hatred, discord, drunkenness, and jealousy. (For more, see Romans 1:18-32, Galatians 5:19-21, and Ephesians 5:3-5.) All those traits that mark a man as corrupt and unlike God are to be put off. They have no place in the resurrection lifestyle.

### **THE CAUSES FOR CLEANUP (3:6, 7)**

Paul cites two causes for an exhaustive cleanup in our lives. The first is in verse 6: “For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come.” One reason not to do these kinds of things anymore is that God acts in judgment. God is holy, and judgment against sin is His constant, never-changing, ever-present reaction against sin. Inescapable consequences follow every sin. Those consequences Paul identifies as “the wrath of God.”

The wrath of God has both a present and a

future reality. In the present, it removes the restraints within society and allows evil to run its course that man might witness the awful destructive force of what he thought was good for him. Ray Stedman writes,

We all suddenly find ourselves facing a flood of evil practices. The restraints that once kept evil under bonds and within bounds, are lifted, and evil practices flood the scene. Laws are flouted, morality is cast aside, evil is praised and defended on every side. Finally we reach a stage in society where almost anything goes and we cannot legislate against anything; the moral fabric of society is destroyed. It is easy to see that this is right where we are today.<sup>1</sup>

The future reality of His wrath is the biblical doctrine of hell. Jesus described this place as one of “outer darkness” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30). Here the holiness of God will be seen in all its blazing glory as eternal punishment is meted out against every transgression of men.

The wrath of God ought to be ample motivation to bring your practice into conformity with your position as a child of God. You certainly do not want to confuse the grace of God with a license to sin. If you do, the day will come when you will be rudely awakened.

A second cause for cleanup is that by definition those sins were a part of your “used-to-be,” not your “now”: “In them you also once walked, when you were living in them” (3:7).

God rescued you from the power of that old lifestyle. Why would you want to return to wallow in it? Through resurrection power you have been released from a vicious cycle that only brought shame, depression, and broken relationships. It would be foolish, having seen the light in Jesus, to go back to walking in darkness. Keep those attitudes and actions that corrupted your life in the past as a part of your old way of living. There is no place for them in a resurrection lifestyle.

### **CONCLUSION**

All this seems pretty elementary, does it not? You would think that Paul would not have to write to a church of God’s people and spell it out like this. This is where the battle is. You have to struggle against this kind of corruption and pollution in your life every day. A resurrection lifestyle takes a lifetime to form.

<sup>1</sup>Ray Stedman, *Discovery Papers*, 1 February 1987, 2.