

# Killing Evil

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Colossians 3:5-11

**Sermon Series:**  
**Journey of Transform-**  
**ation**

*Sin turns good  
things into  
ultimate  
things.*

This is a sermon on sin. Some of you don't care for the word. Sin conjures up memories of hellfire-and-damnation preachers, who rail against the wages of sin. For others of you, sin is a strange-sounding, archaic word. In this permissive society, is there really such a thing as sin anymore?

Psychologist and author Mary Pipher tells a story about an old rancher who was approached by a traveler visiting his community. The visitor asked the rancher what people were like in the region where he lived. The rancher asked in return, "What are people like where you come from?" The traveler said, "They're mean, nasty rascals." "Well," said the rancher, "that's the way they are here, too." Shortly thereafter, another traveler came along and asked the rancher the identical question. Again the rancher asked the visitor what people were like in his hometown. The traveler said, "They're great people, honest, kind-hearted and high-spirited." The rancher replied, "That's the way they are here, too."

Her story reminds us that we are a curious, complex amalgam of good and evil. There are times when we are honest, kind-hearted and high-spirited. There are also times when we are mean, nasty rascals.

There's no getting around sin in our morning Scripture lesson. Colossians 3:5-11 comes with two sin lists. These two sin lists are not assembled at random by Paul. They are carefully crafted and intricately related.

The first list in verse 5 identifies a host of sexual sins. Paul begins by singling out behaviors such as fornication (an old-fashioned word for sexual immorality) and impurity. Then he heads further upstream to trace sin back to its source—to passion and evil desire. Paul identifies the root cause of sin as desire. We want people's bodies. We want their money. We want to get even with people. We want to look better than we really do.

Jesus was a master at getting behind behavior to its root cause. He declares in his famous Sermon on the Mount that the root cause of murder is anger (Matthew 5:21-22), just as the root cause of adultery is lust (5:27-29). If we are going to eradicate sinful behavior, we must attack sin at its source.

Greed, the last word on the list, is a Greek word that means "wanting to have more." Idolatry serves as a synonym to greed in verse 5. All sin, at its core, is idolatry. In Soren Kierkegaard's words, "Sin is not simply doing bad things. It is putting good things in the place of God." Sin turns good things into ultimate things.

***We never find out the strength of evil until we resist it.***

Our sexuality is one of God's creation gifts. Our bodies have been created in the image of God. Our sexuality as male and female is essential to our being and identity. But, like anything, we can make an idol out of sex.

One preacher in my past seemed to have it in for sexual sins. It didn't matter much the topic of the sermon. Whenever he got talking about sin, he would somehow launch into a preacher rant on sexual immorality. When he would preach this way, people in his church would simply roll their eyes and mutter under their breaths, "Here he goes again, talking about sex."

I don't want to single out sexual sins as any more grievous than other sins. Sin is not ranked in the Bible. Coveting someone's good name is no different than coveting a person's body.

That said, let me return to something I said last year in a sermon. We live in a highly sexualized culture. Our culture is awash in sex. Indeed, we are drowning in it. Technology is flooding the marketplace with overt sexual messages. We see it everywhere, in advertising, malls, on computer screens.

It's ironic that the Greek word for fornication, *porneia*, is where we derive our word pornography. We don't talk about pornography in the church. There is an eerie silence on the issue around here. But why should I be surprised? Porn thrives on secrecy. One poll I read indicated that 50 percent of Christian men and 20 percent of

Christian women regularly use pornography.

Porn is doing a number on our next generation. Seventy percent of American men, ages 18-34, view internet pornography on at least a monthly basis. Do not minimize its corrosive effects. Pornography hollows out people and destroys marriages and families.

One of the most dramatic testimonies from this pulpit came from Tom and Joy Rattray, whose 20 year marriage was almost destroyed by porn and its deceit. But this couple faced the darkness and opened themselves to Christ's redeeming work. They shared with us their improbable tale, one Sunday morning, of their journey from separation to reconciliation. Tom shared his story at a recent men's gathering, and I asked him to make his remarks available in printed form at the sign-up table. If you need help in this area of your life, let me direct you to a non-profit ministry they have established called Love's Pure Light. Their website is [www.love'spurelight.org](http://www.love'spurelight.org).

C.S. Lewis said you never know how strong temptation is until you try to resist it. As long as we give in to temptation, we are naïve to its powerful allure. Lewis says bad people know little about badness because they are always giving in to it. We find out the strength of an army by fighting it, not giving in. We never find out the strength of evil until we resist it.

There are two lists of sins in our Scripture lesson. If this first list doesn't humble you, this second list will surely cut you down to size.

***“Which wolf wins?” asked the grandson. The grandfather answered, “Whichever one you feed.”***

This second list in verse 8 addresses our speaking sins. Sins of the tongue incubate as emotions such as anger and rage. If you track these emotions all the way down, you find them showing up in behaviors such as malice, slander and lying.

Must I chronicle today the precipitous loss of civility? Pushy, ill-mannered people are everywhere. AAA reports a sharp rise in the incidents of road rage. Loud, obnoxious fans have become standard fare at sports venues. Republicans and Democrats alike bemoan the loss of decency on Capital Hill.

Civility is not mere manners. We’re not simply talking about using the wrong fork at a dinner party. In Os Guinness’s words, “Civility is a tough, robust substantive concept...that is critical to both democracy and civil society.” We will never make headway on controversial social issues if we can’t practice civility with each other. There is a way to disagree without being disagreeable.

One who gossips in the Greek is literally a whisperer. What an apt description of what people do behind our backs. They whisper gossip and slanderous words.

Churches are not immune to slander and gossip. Gossip kills churches. Gossip drives people out of churches and splits congregations apart.

I know of one church in Michigan where people wear gossip-free wrist bands. There is a pastor in a North Carolina church who preaches a sermon every year on

gossip and requires his members to sign a gossip-free covenant.

I mentioned in a previous sermon the four-way test created by Herbert Taylor. He used this test to save a company on the verge of bankruptcy. Those in Rotary will recognize this four-way test. Is it true? Is it fair to all concerned? Is it kind and beneficial? Will it create goodwill and better friendships?

Paul implores us in verse 5 to put earthly desires to death. His image is stark and vivid. He directs us to kill evil.

Some people are successful at making a decided break with sin. They are able to eliminate an addictive behavior or persistent sin all at once. But most people kill sin and addictive behavior slowly over time. That’s why Paul’s summons to put sin to death is written in present imperative. We are to keep on putting sin to death. We must kill it over and over again.

There is an old Cherokee legend about a grandfather teaching life principles to his grandson. The grandfather says to his grandson, “Son, inside of every person is a battle raging between two wolves. One wolf is evil. It is angry, jealous, unforgiving, proud and lazy. The other wolf is good. It is filled with love, kindness, goodness and self-control. These two wolves are constantly fighting each other.” His grandson thought about it awhile and said, “Grandfather, which wolf wins?” “Ah,” said the grandfather, “whichever one you feed.”

By feeding sin, we give it life. That’s why we must choke sin at its source. George McDonald writes,

***“Be killing sin  
or it will be  
killing you.”***

- John Owen

“We are condemned not for the wicked things we have done, but for not leaving them behind.”

Catholics differentiate mortal from venial sin. I’m not much interested in parsing whether sins fall into slight or grave categories, but I concur that sin is mortal. It kills our relationship with God. The Puritan theologian John Owen said it well: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.”

Putting something to death requires intentionality on our part. That’s why Paul writes in verses 9-10 that we must continually put off the old self and put on the new self. Paul employs the image of taking off an old set of clothes in exchange for new clothes. When new converts to Christianity were baptized in the early church, they exchanged their old garments for a white baptismal robe. It symbolized their death to the old self and their new life in Christ. We wear Christ’s virtues by drawing upon his life. We don’t defeat sin merely by resisting it. We replace it with something else. As we fall in love with Christ, the sins that cling to us lose their potency. Next Sunday, we’ll say more about what it means to put off the old self and put on the new self.

We are calling this sermon series in Colossians a Journey of Transformation. God’s work of redemption not only involves rescuing us from sin. God also wants to change us. God desires to transform our very lives.

