

August 26
Lesson 13 (NIV)

PRACTICING

JUSTICE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Romans 8:1-11

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:25-5:2; Colossians 3:1-17

COLOSSIANS 3:5-17

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

¹² Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.



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KEY VERSE

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.—Colossians 3:12

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify several imperatives of godly behavior.
2. Explain what it means to put off the old self and put on the new.
3. Write a prayer asking God's help in eliminating a besetting sin from the old life.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Agents of Change
- B. Lesson Background

I. Put Off (COLOSSIANS 3:5-9)

- A. Ending Sinful Actions (vv. 5-7)

B. Leaving the Past Behind (vv. 8, 9)

II. Put On (COLOSSIANS 3:10-14)

A. New Creature (vv. 10, 11)

What's a Picture Worth?

B. New Wardrobe (vv. 12-14)

Wit Versus Wisdom

III. Put Forth (COLOSSIANS 3:15-17)

A. With Jesus' Power (vv. 15, 16)

B. In Jesus' Name (v. 17)

Conclusion

A. Just Thinking

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Agents of Change

Often in classic TV or movie Westerns, a new sheriff comes into a corrupt locale and proceeds to “clean things up.” A twentieth-century true version of the story is found in the life of Sheriff Buford Pusser (1937-1974).

In the late 1950s, Pusser moved from his childhood home in McNairy County, Tennessee, to earn a living as a local wrestler in Chicago under the name “Buford the Bull.” Pusser returned home in 1962 after marrying. He then became police chief of Adamsville, Tennessee, a position his father once held.

After the sheriff of McNairy County was killed in an auto accident, Pusser was elected to that position. Despite being the youngest sheriff in Tennessee's history, Pusser promptly began trying to eliminate organized crime in his county. His one-man war on moonshine, prostitution, and gambling along the Tennessee-Mississippi state line became legendary. The 1973 movie *Walking Tall* was based on Pusser's story. The film spawned sequels, a series, and a remake.

There is much that is corrupt with our world. But how can we make a difference when problems seem overwhelming? Paul tells us how to be a true agent of change in our world.

B. Lesson Background

The letter to the Colossians is one of the four “prison epistles,” letters written by Paul while under arrest in Rome. The other three are Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon. The letter we call 2 Timothy was also written by Paul while imprisoned (later), but that letter is grouped with the pastoral epistles. We estimate that Paul wrote the four prison epistles about the year AD 63.

The letter under consideration was addressed to the church in Colossae. That town was situated on the Lycus River in southwest Asia Minor (modern Turkey) on an important commercial highway. The church was made up primarily of Gentiles.

The book of Acts does not mention Paul's being in Colossae, but we believe that Philemon (the recipient of a letter from Paul that bears his name) lived there. This is because Onesimus, the slave whom Paul sent back to Philemon (Philemon 10-12), lived in Colossae for he is mentioned in Colossians 4:9 as “one of” the Colossians.

We find powerful doctrinal content in the first two chapters of Colossians, given by Paul to combat false teaching in the church. He refers to this as “philosophy” (Colossians 2:8), and it seems to have included false teaching about the nature of Christ.

As he often does in his letters, Paul follows the opening doctrinal section with practical teachings on how to live out these great truths. Coming to chapter 3, Paul twice encourages his readers to focus on things above (Colossians 3:1, 2). This means that their behavior should be according to God's standards, not earthly standards. They should conduct themselves in expectations of Christ's return (3:4). This is a way of exhorting them not to be engaged in activities that would embarrass themselves if their Lord made a sudden appearance. This brings us to today's text.

I. Put Off

(COLOSSIANS 3:5-9)

A. Ending Sinful Actions (vv. 5-7)

^{5a}. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature:

If the Lord Jesus could return at any time, how should we then live? A focus on “things above” (Colossians 3:1, 2) will lead us to *put to death* our *earthly nature* that keeps our attention *on the world*. This means putting to death the sinful elements of our lives that separate us from God and make us unprepared for Christ's return (compare Matthew 5:29, 30). Paul teaches elsewhere about putting the old life to death and beginning the new life in Christ (Romans 6:1-7). Being forgiven of our sins is not a justification for continuing in them (6:1, 2).

HOW TO SAY IT

Barbarians Bar-bare-ee-unz.

Colossae Ko-lahss-ee.

Colossians Kuh-losh-unz.

Onesimus O-ness-ih-muss.

Philemon Fih-lee-mun or Fye-lee-mun.

Scythians Sith-ee-unz.

5^b. sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Lest the readers misunderstand what must be given the death sentence, Paul lists five examples. The first is *sexual immorality*. Paul and the other writers of the Bible consistently limit sexual activity to the relations between a man and a woman married to each other. All other sexual activity is seen as immorality (compare [1 Corinthians 6:18](#)).

The words that follow are related to this prohibition. *Impurity* is another term for sexual sin, emphasizing its degrading, shameful aspects. *Lust* is “strong desire,” referring to desire for something to which one has no right. That is followed by *evil desires*—a phrase that reemphasizes a yearning for what is forbidden (see also [Ephesians 4:19](#); [5:3, 5](#)).

What Do You Think?

What practical steps help you stay morally pure in a sexually saturated culture?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When confronted with cultural redefinitions of morality

When in the presence of people whose moral boundaries are unbiblical

Other

The next term, *greed*, is the same as covetousness. This should be familiar since it is part of the Ten Commandments ([Exodus 20:17](#)). While this may refer to a selfish desire for sexual gratification, the term is commonly used for the desire to have an abundance of anything—money, possessions, or pleasure. Following the other terms, it may widen the focus on sexual sin to include all kinds of selfish desires.

Paul summarizes his teaching by equating greed with *idolatry* (compare [Ephesians 5:5](#)). The biblical concept of idolatry is more than the worship of statues of other gods. In the first century AD, worship involving idols often includes immoral sexual activity; but there is more than this here. At its core, idolatry occurs when we allow anything to displace God as the proper recipient of our worship. Covetousness disregards God and his proper place in our hearts, and this is never clearer than in the commission of sexual sin in deliberate violation of God’s intent for our lives.

6. 7. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.

Paul’s list of sexually oriented sins is familiar to the Colossians on a personal level. They *used to walk in these* kinds of sins, which is similar to *once lived in* them. The word *walk* is used commonly as a metaphor in the Bible to indicate the way people live their lives, the life choices they make (examples: [Deuteronomy 10:12](#); [John 8:12](#); [1 John 1:6, 7](#)).

Paul’s warning is dire: disregard for God and his standards of holiness promises a frightful outcome at the return of the Lord. That outcome is to be subject to *the wrath of God*. His judgmental anger will fall on the unrepentant, who defiantly and consistently disobey his standards.

Many Christians do not like to talk or think about the wrath of God, preferring to dwell on his love. But God’s anger, which is never arbitrary or capricious, is real. Human sin calls it forth.

B. Leaving the Past Behind (vv. 8, 9)

8. 9. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices . . .

This list focuses on our attitudes and actions toward others. To drive home his conviction that these belong to the old life and not to the new, Paul commences to use one of his most powerful metaphors: that of taking off and/or putting on garments (compare [Romans 13:12](#); [Galatians 3:27](#); [Ephesians 4:22-24](#)). He depicts Christians “wearing” their deeds as clothing, meaning they are public for all to see. We shed filthy garments of dishonor when we eliminate particular sins from our lives.

The first two items on the list, *anger* and *rage*, might seem ironic since Paul has just warned of the impending wrath of God on unrepentant sinners. Here, however, Paul is condemning human anger that seeks to harm others. Anger as such is not a sin; it is a God-given emotion. But anger born of a desire for revenge is indeed sinful. The third item, *malice*, reinforces the distinction between God’s righteous wrath and our self-serving anger.

What Do You Think?

How do you keep anger from crossing the line from justified ([Mark 3:5](#)) to sinful ([James 1:19, 20](#))?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Prior to anger arising

While you are angry

Paul ends with three sinful deeds of the mouth. *Slander* (literally, “blasphemy”) is disrespectful speech about God and things associated with God. If we are willing to treat with contempt those who bear God’s image, we show no respect for God himself. Disrespectful language amounts to malicious defamation, something often the product of angry words.

This is followed by two other types of sinful talk, *filthy language* and lying to others. With public discourse becoming coarser by the day, we can become numb to obscenity and profanity. If we’re not vigilant, that numbness can lead to participation. It is unfortunate that some Christians, even church leaders, do not hold themselves to a higher standard in this area.

The prohibition against lying calls to mind the ninth commandment ([Exodus 20:16](#)). At its core, lying is deception intended to achieve our own selfish ends. Deception and selfishness are foundational to our *old self* and must have no part in our new life.

Paul’s summary of leaving this ungodly behavior behind uses his metaphor of taking off clothing. We have discarded (*have taken off*) the robe of the *old self*, the selfish sinful person, as signified by discarding our sinful *practices*. We do this deliberately and intentionally, just as we would take off a winter jacket when we come into the house.

II. Put On

([COLOSSIANS 3:10-14](#))

A. New Creature (vv. 10, 11)

^{10, 11.} . . . and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

In Paul's imagery, we don't stand naked after disrobing from our sinful behaviors. We replace the discards with the proper clothing, *the new self*, because we are being restored to *the image* in which we were *created*, the image of God ([Genesis 1:26, 27](#)). Ultimately this is the image of Christ, God's Son ([Romans 8:29](#)). From a behavior standpoint, we should look a lot like Jesus. This also involves a *knowledge* renewal, changed thinking in regard to sin.

The universal application of the image of Christ finds expression in Paul's description of him who *is all, and is in all*. This is further defined by the three inclusive contrasts that precede that sweeping statement. In Paul's world one is either a *Gentile* or a *Jew*, either *circumcised* or not, either *slave* or *free*. All of humanity is thus included; all are eligible to be clothed with the image of Christ.

Paul uses two other categories. Barbarians are non-Greek speakers considered uncultured and barely civilized. Scythians live on the north shore of the Black Sea and are considered to be extremely backward, the ultimate barbarians of the ancient world. Paul is not putting these groups down. Rather, he is telling the Colossians (who think of themselves as educated, cultured Greeks) that donning the image of Christ is possible even for those on the lowest rung of the culture ladder.

WHAT'S A PICTURE WORTH?

"A picture is worth a thousand words"—or so we used to think! Before the days of digital imagery, faking a picture to make it seem real required much skill and time, plus a darkroom equipped for the task. Today all it requires is a computer and proper software such as Photoshop. The right software enables digital manipulation to the heart's content: people can be added and removed from scenes, day can be changed to night—the list is endless.

You've probably received an e-mail with a subject line that suggests the photographer was on hand at just the right moment to take a striking photo. Chances are, the "right moment" was the moment at the computer when the one editing the photo combined pieces from two or more photos to create the desired effect. A common example from calendars is a spectacular picture of a rising full moon in which the moon fills a much larger portion of the sky than it ever does in reality. So nowadays a picture may be worth only one word: *fake* or *manipulated*.

The question for each and every Christian is, "Does the image of Christ I present to the world reflect reality, or is it a fake?" A highly manipulated image that we put together for Sunday services or Monday work will eventually be seen for what it truly represents: hypocrisy. Don't go there.

—C. R. B.

B. New Wardrobe (vv. 12-14)

^{12.} Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Paul begins to specify seven qualities that are to be used to *clothe* ourselves, but first he defines his audience. *God's chosen people* are the Christians, further defined as *holy and dearly loved*. God's love makes salvation possible ([John 3:16](#)). When we accept his Son according to the biblical plan of salvation, we become set apart in purity (holy) from sinful humanity even as we continue to live among unrepentant people. In the pattern of Christ, we are not of the world ([17:14, 16](#)). The new garments we wear to reflect this reality should be evident for all to see.

The word *compassion* indicates a strong feeling of empathy for others; this is a response of the heart. *Kindness* likewise indicates a positive, generous, gracious response to others' needs. *Humility* and *gentleness* stress adopting a position of lowliness, seeking to serve others instead of asserting one's own rights or privileges. *Patience* indicates the willingness to wait as long as it takes for others to make the right response, just as God waited for us to respond to him ([Ephesians 4:32](#)). Such "clothing" as this surely identifies a person as belonging to Christ.

What Do You Think?

In practical terms, what does it look like to have put on the attributes of which Paul speaks?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When interacting with fellow believers

When interacting with unbelievers

When interacting with total strangers whose spiritual status is unknown to you

^{13.} Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Paul's sixth category of Christlike clothing is particularly applicable when a Christian develops a *grievance against someone* within the church. *Bear with each other* means we don't give up on our relationships. A vital aspect of that is to *forgive one another*. When a quarrel looms, we don't have to win. We can derail a church fight before it begins if we practice mutual forbearance and forgiveness.

Paul includes a humbling reminder of our prime example: *the Lord*. Those who clothe themselves with Christ should not forget the great forgiveness that Jesus has bestowed on all of us. This reminder should make our quibbles seem vanishingly petty by comparison.

^{14.} And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Paul ends his list of Christ-clothing with the one that ties it all together: *love*. The phrase *over all these virtues* is striking in that it views love as a topcoat, to be put on over all else. This is the quality that *binds them all together* as the ultimate unifier for the body of Christ. Let us love one another as Christ has loved us ([John 13:34](#)).

WIT VERSUS WISDOM

Who among us doesn't secretly admire the wit that enables some people to come up with spontaneous, clever retorts? On a certain occasion, Winston Churchill was purportedly speaking with Lady Nancy Astor, a longtime political enemy, when she said to him, "If you were my husband, I'd put poison in your tea."

Churchill's response was, "Madam, if you were my wife, I'd drink it."

Much as we might admire the ease that some people have with witty retorts, the wisdom of Scripture urges a different approach. A put-down won't succeed in building up, but compassion and forgiveness will.

—C. R. B.

III. Put Forth

(COLOSSIANS 3:15-17)

A. With Jesus' Power (vv. 15, 16)

¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

The loving church will be a peaceful church, and for this we should *be thankful*. This has not been engineered by our brilliance but by following the example of Christ and conforming to his image (Romans 8:29).

If we live with love, forgiveness, and patience for others, our hearts will be filled with *the peace of Christ*. We are part of *one body*, the organization whose head loved its future constituents so much that he died for them (Ephesians 5:23-25).

What Do You Think?

Does one focus on having inner peace to be able to exhibit love and forgiveness to others, or does one exhibit love and forgiveness to others so inner peace will result?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering situational issues

Considering scriptural guidance (Proverbs 12:20; 14:30; Matthew 15:18, 19; Luke 6:45; Romans 14:19; Galatians 5:22; Ephesians 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 2:22)

¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Paul finishes this section with specific qualities that characterize the peaceful church. First, *the message of Christ* must find a home in the hearts of believers. There should be an eagerness to learn the ways of God. This is a path of *wisdom*, knowing God's plan for living and then choosing to live that way.

Paul then offers a mechanism for implementing this imperative: *we are to teach* (primary instruction) and *admonish* (encouragement to follow the instruction) *one another*. A highly effective but often underused method of doing both is through the words of the songs we sing together in the context of worship.

There are technical distinctions among *psalms*, *hymns*, and *songs from the Spirit*, but it's their cumulative effect that interests Paul. That which we sing about will find its way into our hearts in powerful and memorable ways, often coming to mind later. Therefore, we should sing what we believe and believe what we sing.

B. In Jesus' Name (v. 17)

¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Paul's final words in this section call us to harmonize our words and our deeds, our talk and our actions. This harmonization happens when both are in accordance with what *the name of the Lord Jesus* signifies (Matthew 18:5, 20; etc.). We are to say and do what he would have us say and do.

Jesus' message is for everyone. All are invited to come to him (Matthew 11:28-30). We can be his ambassadors for kindness, for hope, and for justice in our communities, but above all we are his ambassadors for eternal life in Heaven. For such a privilege let us be thankful, and may our actions express this gratitude *to God* through his Son Jesus Christ.

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to ensure that your efforts are always in the name of Jesus?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding what you say (speech patterns)

Regarding what you do (behavior patterns)



Visual for Lessons 12 & 13. *Point to this visual as you ask, "Which entry on the left exerts the strongest pull on a Christian to return to the old way? Why?"*

Conclusion

A. Just Thinking

Righteousness means doing the right thing. It is closely tied to the biblical understanding of justice: wanting to see the right thing done from God's perspective and according to his Word. The one who loves justice is the person who wants to see the right thing done for others.

But sin stands in the way of that happening. Sin comes in two categories: acts of commission and acts of omission. God becomes angry not only when his commandments are actively broken but also when people fail to do what they should. When we commit unrighteous acts, we sin by commission; when we can correct an injustice we see but fail to act, we sin by omission. Both dishonor the name of the Lord Jesus. Both discredit what Paul says we have put on.

B. Prayer

Lord God, may your Word dwell richly in our hearts, so much so that we are increasingly conformed to the image of your Son. Make us ever aware that what we have put off has no further place in our lives, and what we have put on must be honored. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

We can only bring change to the extent
that we let God change us.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Bring three outfits to class: one that you might wear to an office, one that you'd wear at a more formal gathering (wedding, etc.), and one that you'd wear to a workout at the gym. (*Alternative.* For simplicity, search for images online and print them out instead.) Display each outfit and have class members offer several suggestions as to where each set of clothes might be worn.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Puzzled" activity from the reproducible page, which can be downloaded. Have learners work in pairs to discover a verse from today's study that speaks to elements of spiritual attire to discard.

After completing either activity, lead into the Bible study by saying, "The way someone dresses can tell a lot about that person. Sometimes we can guess a person's occupation, or even where he or she might be headed. We have spiritual clothing as well. And how we dress ourselves spiritually speaks volumes about us and where we are headed."

Into the Word

Divide the class into three groups. Assign one group [verses 5-9](#) of the lesson text, another group [verses 10-14](#), and the third group [verses 15-17](#). Instruct groups to (1) list character traits in their passages, (2) identify what impact those traits would have on someone's relationship with God, and (3) identify what positive or negative impact those traits could have on other people.

After several minutes have groups share their findings. Lead a discussion about the impact that reemergence of the old self can have on Christian unity. Then discuss how the new life has the opposite effect.

Option. Use the "Sounds Like / Looks Like" exercise from the reproducible page, which can be downloaded. Decide whether to do the activity in small groups or to stay together. If you stay together, ask for a volunteer to choose one of Paul's imperatives. When it is voiced, ask the class, "If you had only your sense of hearing, what would it sound like for someone to practice that virtue?" Jot answers in the left column. Then ask, "If you only had your sense of vision, how would you know someone was practicing that virtue? What would it look like?" Jot answers in the right column. Repeat as time allows.

Alternative. Instead of allowing volunteers to choose which of Paul's imperatives to discuss as above, you can either (1) make the choices yourself or (2) go down the list in the order Paul wrote them.

Into Life

Create a time of quiet reflection. Set the mood by playing meditative worship music in the background. Explain that you are giving your class a few minutes to reflect quietly on which of the negative attributes of the old self they most continue to wrestle with. Have them write that attribute on a slip of paper (assure students that you will not collect what they write). Point out that Paul's list wasn't intended to be comprehensive. For those who don't see their besetting sin on the list, encourage them to write in what seems most applicable.

Next, have learners meditate on who might be negatively affected by their besetting sin. Encourage learners to feel free to use symbols to protect privacy. Again, assure learners that you will not collect their written notes.

Finally, instruct students to look at Paul's imperatives that contribute to putting on the new self and choose one to work on in the week ahead. Have them write down one practical way they will live out that imperative this week; suggest they affix the note in a location where it will be seen daily as a reminder. Close with the prayer from page 447.