

Homiletics Analysis: Colossians 3

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Colossians 3 is a sustained ethical exhortation anchored in a single theological indicative: believers have died with Christ and been raised with Him, and their true life is hidden in Him until the day of His appearing. From this foundation, Paul constructs two movements. The first (vv. 1–17) moves from the theological reality of union with Christ (vv. 1–4) through a negative command to put off the old life (vv. 5–11) and a positive command to put on the new life shaped by Christ's character and word (vv. 12–17). The second movement (vv. 18–25) introduces the household code (*Haustafeln*), addressing wives and husbands, children and fathers, and bondservants and masters — each relationship governed by the Lordship of Christ. The chapter ends with a sober reminder that God, not social position, is the true rewarder and judge. Throughout, Paul's argument is controlled by a single logic: what you are in Christ determines how you are to live; being must precede doing; the gospel is not merely the beginning of the Christian life but its entire engine.

This Text — Intent:

Paul is not merely cataloguing virtues and vices for moral instruction. He is seeking to produce in his readers a comprehensive reorientation of identity — a settled conviction that the old self is genuinely dead and the new self is genuinely alive in Christ — from which transformed behavior flows organically. The intent is gospel-motivated holiness: that the Colossian believers (and all subsequent readers) would stop living as though they still belong to the old world, and would begin inhabiting every relationship and every domestic sphere with the character of Christ as their daily clothing. God is calling His people to live, from the inside out, as those who have already been raised.

Subject Sentence: Since believers have died and risen with Christ, the whole of life is now to be lived from that union.

Primary Claim: Because you have died with Christ and been raised with Him, your entire identity has changed — and God is calling you to stop living from the old self and start inhabiting every relationship with the character of the new self Christ has made you.

Interpretive Evaluation

The theological indicative and the ethical imperative: The central interpretive question in Colossians 3 is the relationship between the declarative statements of vv. 1–4 and the commands that follow. Some traditions (particularly in popular evangelical and Wesleyan teaching) read the imperatives of vv. 5–17 as the primary content and treat vv. 1–4 as a brief motivational preface. This inverts Paul’s logic. The indicative is not a warm-up for the imperative — it *generates* the imperative. The commands to “put to death” and “put on” are intelligible only as outworkings of a death and resurrection that has already occurred. The Reformed reading, which insists that the moral life flows from the completed work of union with Christ rather than constituting or completing it, is the reading the text demands. The verbs of vv. 1–4 are all in the aorist or perfect tense, indicating completed action; only then do the present-tense imperatives of transformation appear.

Wesleyan/Arminian readings — “put to death” as ongoing moral achievement: Some Wesleyan interpreters read the imperative of v. 5 (“put to death therefore what is earthly in you”) as evidence that sanctification is a progressive moral project of human effort, and that the believer’s will is the primary agent in mortification. This reading rightly affirms the seriousness of the command and the ongoing nature of sanctification. However, it underreads the force of “therefore” (οὖν), which tethers the command entirely to the prior reality of vv. 1–4. Mortification in Paul is not self-improvement — it is the outworking of a death already accomplished. The Reformed reading (following Calvin, Owen, and Murray) is preferred: mortification is real, ongoing, and demanding — but it is the *fruit* of union with Christ, not its *contribution*. The agent is not naked human will but the Spirit (cf. Romans 8:13), though Colossians 3 does not explicitly invoke the Spirit by name. Acknowledge the Wesleyan insistence that the commands are real commands requiring real effort; qualify by grounding that effort in the prior indicative.

The household code — hierarchical structure and modern egalitarian readings: Colossians 3:18–4:1 is one of the most contested passages in contemporary hermeneutics. Egalitarian readings (across evangelical, mainline, and progressive traditions) argue either that the household code reflects first-century cultural accommodation that cannot be normatively binding, or that the code’s internal logic (mutual submission, Christ-directedness of all parties) undermines hierarchical application. Complementarian Reformed readers argue that the code reflects creational order expressed through the Lordship of Christ, and that the reciprocal duties do not flatten the asymmetrical structure but rather Christianize it — calling husbands to Christlike sacrifice, not domination; fathers to nurturing gentleness, not tyranny; masters to justice, not ownership. The text should be allowed to stand as structured: submission, obedience, and service are addressed to specific parties, not interchangeably. However, the code does not endorse the abuse of its structure — Paul’s restrictions on those *in authority* (love your wives, do not provoke your children, treat bondservants justly) are as binding as the duties of those *under authority*. Refute the reading that dissolves the structure entirely; qualify the reading that enforces the structure without its corresponding obligations.

“There is no Greek and Jew... but Christ is all and in all” (v. 11): Some readings, particularly progressive and social-justice oriented interpretations, take v. 11 as Paul’s abolition of all social distinctions — including those that reappear in the household code just a few verses later. This creates an apparent contradiction. The Reformed reading resolves it by distinguishing between *ontological* equality before God (the meaning of v. 11 — all are equally clothed in Christ, all equally members of the new humanity) and *functional* differentiation in creaturely relationships (the meaning of the household code). Paul is not inconsistent; he is showing that the new humanity in Christ does not erase creaturely structure but redeems and orients it. Acknowledge the real force of v. 11 as a statement of radical equality before God; refute the reading that treats it as a social program abolishing all differentiation.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 6:1–14** — The theological parallel to Colossians 3:1–4: death and resurrection with Christ as the definitive basis for mortification and newness of life; “consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” grounds the Pauline indicative-imperative structure.
 - **Ephesians 4:17–5:2** — The parallel household and community ethics section; “put off the old self... put on the new self” language directly illuminates Colossians 3:9–10, confirming that the clothing metaphor is a sustained Pauline theological concept.
 - **Galatians 3:27–28** — “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ... there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” — the direct canonical parallel to Colossians 3:11, grounding the new-humanity claim in union with Christ.
 - **Psalms 110:1** — The exaltation of Christ “at the right hand” of God, to which Paul alludes in Colossians 3:1 (“seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God”), anchors the eschatological dimension: believers are oriented toward an enthroned Lord whose return will reveal what is currently hidden.
 - **Genesis 1:26–28 / Colossians 3:10** — “Being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (v. 10) is Paul’s explicit invocation of the *imago Dei* — the new self in Christ is the restoration of what was lost in the fall; the new humanity is the recovery of the original creational design, now secured and surpassed in the Last Adam.
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Aim: To demonstrate that every dimension of the Christian life — personal, relational, domestic — is governed by the single reality of union with Christ, and to call readers to inhabit that union concretely rather than abstractly.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:1	Command to seek the things above, grounded in resurrection with Christ; Christ is seated at God's right hand	The imperative flows from the aorist indicative "you have been raised"; Psalm 110:1 echoed
3:2	Command to set the mind on things above, not on things of earth	"Set your mind" (φρονεῖτε) — ongoing present imperative; a disposition, not a single act
3:3	Death-with-Christ as completed fact; the hidden life in God	"You have died" (aorist); the hiddenness is eschatological, not existential doubt
3:4	Christ as "your life"; the appearing of Christ and the co-revelation of believers in glory	The eschatological climax of the indicative section; identity anchored in future unveiling
3:5	Command to put to death the earthly: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness — named as idolatry	"Therefore" (οὖν) makes this logically consequent; covetousness as idolatry echoes the Decalogue's logic
3:6	God's wrath comes upon the sons of disobedience because of these things	Eschatological warning; wrath is not merely future but is already in motion
3:7	The Colossians formerly walked in these vices	Biographical grounding of the command; this was your life — it is not now
3:8	Second vice list: anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk — put away	Social/relational vices follow personal/sexual ones; the community is now in view
3:9a	Command: do not lie to one another	Truth-telling as a community standard; falsehood belongs to the old self
3:9b–10	Because the old self has been put off and the new self put on — being renewed in	The theological ground: this is what has happened; behavior must match reality;

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	knowledge after the image of the Creator	<i>imago Dei</i> restoration language
3:11	In the new humanity there is no Greek/Jew, circumcised/uncircumcised, barbarian/Scythian, slave/free — Christ is all and in all	Radical ontological equality in the new self; ethnic, cultural, and social hierarchies do not define identity in Christ
3:12	Command to put on: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience	Addressed to “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” — identity precedes virtue list
3:13	Command to bear with one another and forgive — as the Lord has forgiven you	Forgiveness is grounded in the prior forgiveness received; this is gospel-logic, not mere social strategy
3:14	Above all: put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony	Love as the supreme garment that holds the others in place
3:15	Let the peace of Christ rule in hearts; gratitude as the disposition of the community	“Rule” (βραβεύετω) — to umpire or arbitrate; peace as a governing principle, not a feeling
3:16	Let the word of Christ dwell richly; teaching, admonishing, singing psalms/hymns/spiritual songs with gratitude	Corporate dimensions: the Word shapes the community; worship is part of the communal putting-on
3:17	Summary principle: whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks	The comprehensive frame: all of life under the Lordship of Christ
3:18	Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord	First household pair; “in the Lord” qualifies and governs the instruction
3:19	Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them	The husband’s corresponding obligation; love not domination is the Christlike pattern

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:20	Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord	Obedience framed as worship — “pleases the Lord”
3:21	Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged	The restraint on parental authority; authority is not to crush but to form
3:22	Bondservants, obey your earthly masters in everything — not with eye-service but in sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord	Sincerity of heart distinguishes Christian service from mere compliance
3:23	Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men	The governing hermeneutic for all service: it is all ultimately rendered to Christ
3:24	The Lord Himself is the rewarder; bondservants are serving the Lord Christ	The ultimate Judge and Rewarder is not the earthly master but Christ
3:25	The wrongdoer will be repaid for the wrong done; there is no partiality	A warning that applies to all parties in the household code, not only bondservants

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	3:1–4	The Indicative Foundation: Raised with Christ, Hidden in God
2	3:5–11	Putting Off: Mortification of the Old Self and Its Vices
3	3:12–17	Putting On: Vivification and the Character of the New Self
4	3:18–25	The Lordship of Christ Over Every Household Relationship

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Since believers have died and risen with Christ, the whole of life is now to be lived from that union.

Primary Claim: Because you have died with Christ and been raised with Him, your entire identity has changed — and God is calling you to stop living from the old self and start inhabiting every relationship with the character of the new self Christ has made you.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) Settle the question of who you are before you attempt to change what you do.

The single most common failure in the Christian moral life is attempting to produce new behavior from an unchanged identity. Colossians 3 does not begin with a to-do list — it begins with a completed reality: you have died, and your life is hidden in Christ. Before any command to put off or put on is issued, Paul spends four verses anchoring the reader in who they already are. The practical application is this: time spent meditating on the finished reality of union with Christ — not as a spiritual warm-up but as the necessary foundation of all transformation — is not time wasted on theology at the expense of practice; it *is* the practice. Believers who attempt mortification of sin without first settling their identity in Christ will either produce self-righteous performance or exhausted despair. Begin with vv. 1–4. Return to them daily.

2. (*Affections/Worship*) Let the specific vices Paul names diagnose your specific idols, not just your surface behaviors.

Paul's vice list in vv. 5–9 does not merely catalogue bad behavior — it exposes the heart beneath behavior by identifying covetousness as *idolatry*. This is not accidental. Every sin on both lists is the outworking of worship directed at something other than God: sexual sin worships the body and its pleasures; anger and malice worship the self and its vindication; covetousness worships security and control in the form of possessions. The application is not to try harder to stop the behavior but to identify what the behavior is *worshipping* — and to bring that false god before the One who alone can displace it. Ask of each recurring sin: what is this protecting, securing, or serving? Name the idol, not just the symptom.

3. (*Will/Behavior*) Choose one garment from vv. 12–14 and consciously put it on before your next significant relational encounter.

Paul's clothing metaphor is deliberately embodied and practical. You put on clothes deliberately, specifically, in a particular order. The application here is equally deliberate: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and love are not abstract virtues to be generally admired — they are specific postures to be specifically chosen before specific encounters. Before the next difficult conversation with a spouse, a

child, a colleague, or an adversary, identify which garment from vv. 12–14 is most needed in that particular encounter, and consciously choose to wear it. The “putting on” is intentional, not passive — it requires the discipline of advance preparation, not merely reactive goodwill.

4. (*Affections/Worship*) Reframe your ordinary work and domestic life as acts of worship rendered to Christ, not performances for human approval.

Colossians 3:23–24 is one of the most practically transformative claims in the New Testament: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” This reframes the entire domain of ordinary labor — whether paid work, domestic service, child-rearing, or the invisible acts no one notices — as liturgy offered to Christ Himself. The application is not to work harder but to work *differently*: with the awareness that the actual audience for every act of faithful service is the Lord who sees what is done in secret and who will repay it. This is liberating where human recognition is absent; it is humbling where human recognition has become the secret engine of effort.

5. (*Mind/Belief*) Learn to read the household code’s obligations on *authority* as seriously as its obligations on *submission* — and resist any use of Colossians 3 that applies pressure to one party without the other.

The household code does not simply call the lesser-powered parties (wives, children, bondservants) to comply — it calls the more-powered parties (husbands, fathers, masters) to a Christlike exercise of their authority that is demanding, constrained, and accountable to God. Husbands are called to love sacrificially, not to be served. Fathers are explicitly forbidden from discouraging their children. Masters are reminded that they answer to the same impartial Judge their bondservants do. Any reading of Colossians 3:18–25 that emphasizes the duties of the less-powerful without equally emphasizing the responsibilities of the more-powerful is not a reading of Paul — it is a selective use of Paul’s text to justify what Paul himself was constraining. Teach both sides as equally binding.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Colossians 3 establishes one of Scripture’s most explicit statements of the relationship between *indicative* and *imperative* in Christian ethics — what God has declared about the believer in Christ is the ground and engine of what God now calls the believer to do. The passage teaches that union with Christ is not merely a forensic or legal status but a lived ontological reality that reshapes identity at the level of what is “earthly” in a person: desires, speech, relational posture, and domestic conduct. It also teaches a robust eschatology of hiddenness and future revelation: the fullness of what believers are in Christ is not yet visible, but it will be made manifest at His appearing — a reality that gives moral seriousness to the present without making the present the ultimate measuring rod. The *imago Dei* language of v. 10 (“renewed in knowledge after the

image of its creator”) situates the entire ethical project within the story of creation, fall, and new-creation restoration: the new self is not merely an improvement of the old but a genuine recovery, by grace, of the human creature’s original design.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Colossians 3 is a touchstone passage for the Reformed understanding of definitive sanctification — the once-for-all dying and rising with Christ that precedes and grounds all progressive sanctification. The passage resists two common errors equally: antinomianism (the indicative has no ethical consequence, because grace covers everything) and moralism (the imperative is the engine, and the indicative is merely motivation). Paul’s “therefore” (v. 5) is the hinge: the commands are real and demanding, but they are consequential, not constitutive — they flow from a death and resurrection already accomplished, not toward a spiritual standing still to be achieved. This is the grammar of Reformed sanctification: free justification producing grateful, Spirit-enabled mortification and vivification. The household code, read within the broader Reformed framework of creation and redemption, affirms that Christ’s Lordship redeems but does not abolish creaturely structure — marriage, family, and labor remain ordered realities, now placed under a new governing motive (the fear of the Lord and love for Christ) that transforms their character without erasing their shape. Colossians 3 thus grounds the Reformed insistence that the gospel is not merely the entry point of the Christian life but its continuous source and fuel.

Main Takeaway

You are not trying to become a new person. In Christ, you already are one — that is Paul’s entire point. The old self is dead; the new self is alive and is being renewed daily after the image of the God who made you. What remains is to stop dressing like a corpse and start wearing what you actually are: chosen, holy, beloved, clothed in Christ. That reorientation governs everything — how you treat your body, how you speak to your spouse, how you raise your children, how you show up at work on a day when no one is watching. Christ is Lord of all of it, rewarder of all of it, and present in all of it. Live like it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Preaching the imperative without the indicative, and producing moralism.** The most common failure in preaching Colossians 3 is beginning the sermon at v. 5 (the vice list) and treating vv. 1–4 as a brief theological preface to get past before the

“real” application starts. This inverts Paul’s architecture completely. The indicative of vv. 1–4 is not a warm-up — it is the load-bearing foundation without which the imperatives collapse into self-improvement. A sermon that calls people to “put off” and “put on” without first establishing *who they are* in Christ will produce either pride or despair, not gospel-motivated transformation. Preach the indicative as the main thing, not the supporting thing.

- **Treating the vice and virtue lists as checklists rather than identity diagnostics.** Paul’s lists are not behavioral inventories for self-assessment — they are descriptions of two different people: the old self and the new self. Preaching them as a checklist (“am I doing these things or not?”) misses the point. The question Paul is pressing is not “how are you doing on the list?” but “which self are you living from today?” Applications that emerge from this identity-diagnostic reading will be far more penetrating and gospel-shaped than those that emerge from a behavioral audit.
- **Using the household code selectively — pressing the submissive obligations without equally pressing the authority obligations.** Paul addresses *both* parties in every household pair, and his constraints on those in authority are not decorative. Preaching that calls wives to submit without equally calling husbands to love sacrificially, or that calls children to obey without equally calling fathers not to discourage, misreads the code and can cause pastoral harm. The code is a two-sided document. Preach both sides with equal weight.
- **Treating “Christ is all and in all” (v. 11) as a social program rather than an ontological claim.** Verse 11 is frequently extracted and used as a proof-text for the abolition of all social roles and distinctions in the church and home. This reading ignores that Paul, within the same chapter, maintains structural differentiation in the household code. The verse’s claim is about ontological standing before God in Christ — not a social policy. To use it to dissolve the household code’s structure is to make Paul incoherent. Distinguish between equality of standing (v. 11) and differentiation of creaturely role (vv. 18–25).
- **Missing the eschatological frame and producing a this-worldly therapeutic ethics.** Colossians 3 opens and closes with eschatological logic: the hiddenness of present life (v. 3), the future appearing of Christ (v. 4), the coming wrath (v. 6), and the impartial divine Judge (v. 25). A sermon on Colossians 3 that focuses only on the psychological and relational benefits of putting off vice and putting on virtue has missed the chapter’s driving motive: believers live *coram Deo*, before the face of the God who sees, rewards, and will judge. The practical Christian life is not primarily about flourishing — it is primarily about faithfulness to the Lord to whom all of life is rendered.
- **Losing “whatever you do” (v. 17 and v. 23) as the chapter’s governing summary.** Paul twice uses a comprehensive summary phrase — “whatever you do in word or

deed” (v. 17) and “whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord” (v. 23) — to frame the entire ethical project as comprehensive Lordship. These summaries must not be buried. They are Paul’s way of saying: there is no secular sphere, no private zone, no domestic corner of life that stands outside Christ’s governing claim. This is one of Scripture’s clearest foundations for the Reformed doctrine of the Lordship of Christ over all of life — do not preach past it.

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