

3:5a *Put to Death What is Earthly in You*

Postbaptismal Sin.

Chrysostom: Does Paul write as though these things were in us? There is no contradiction. It is similar to one who has scoured a statue that was filthy, recast it, and displayed it new and bright, explaining that the rust was eaten off and destroyed. Yet he recommends diligence in clearing away the future rust. He does not contradict himself, for it is not that rust which he scoured off that he recommends should be cleared away but that which grew afterwards. So it is not that former putting to death he speaks of here, nor those fornications, but those which afterward grow. Homilies on Colossians 8.26

The Practice of Virtue.

Athanasius: But the saints, and they who truly practice virtue, “mortify their members” and as the result of this, are pure and without spot, confiding in the promise of our Savior, who said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”²⁷ These, having become dead to the world, who have renounced the merchandise of the world, gain an honorable death. Festal Letters 7.3.²⁸

Sinful Desire Still Present in the Baptized.

Augustine: Thus, in movements according to the spirit, the soul sometimes opposes other movements of itself according to the flesh. Conversely, in movements according to the flesh, it opposes others which it has according to the spirit, and this is why we say the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit lusts against the flesh. But this is also why “it is being renewed day by day,”²⁹ for the soul does not fail to make progress in virtue as it gradually diminishes the carnal desires to which it does not consent. It is to those already baptized that the apostle says, “Mortify your members, which are on the earth.” Against Julian 6.14.41.³⁰

3:5b *Covetousness is Idolatry*

All Sin Is Idolatry.

Jerome: In a general way all that is of the devil is characterized by hatred for God. What is of the devil is idolatry, since all idols are subject to him. Yet Paul elsewhere lays down the law in express terms, saying: “Mortify your members.” Idolatry is not confined to casting incense upon an altar with finger and thumb or to pouring libations of wine out of a cup into a bowl. Letters 14.5.³¹

3:9–10 *Put Off the Old Nature, Put on the New Nature*

Moral Choice, Not Physical Substance.

Chrysostom: Moral choice rather than human nature is the determining factor and rather constitutes “the human condition” than the natural determinants. For human nature itself does not cast one into hell, nor does it lead one into the kingdom, but this happens by men themselves. We neither love nor hate anyone so far as he is man, but so far as he is such or such a man. If then our real essence as human beings is the body, which in any case cannot be accountable, how can one say that the body is evil? But what does Paul say? “With his doings.” He means freedom of choice, with its accompanying acts. Homilies on Colossians 8.32

Stripping Off the Old.

Basil the Great: Seek nothing with exterior gold and bodily adornment; but consider the garment as one worthy to adorn him who is according to the image of his Creator, as the apostle says: “Stripping off the old man, and putting on the new, one that is being renewed unto perfect knowledge ‘according to the image of his Creator.’ ” And he who has put on “the heart of mercy, kindness, humility, patience and meekness” is clothed within and has adorned the inner man. Homilies 17.11.33

Reclaim the Image.

Ambrose: Therefore, as upon the cross it was not the fullness of the Godhead but our weakness that was brought into subjection, so also will the Son hereafter become subject to the Father in his participation in our nature. This is so that when the lusts of the flesh are brought into subjection the heart may have no concern for riches or ambition or pleasures. The intention is that God may be all to us, if we live after his image and likeness, as far as we can attain to it, through all. The benefit has passed, then, from the individual to the community; for in his flesh he has tamed the nature of all human flesh.... Therefore, “laying aside all these,” that is those things we read of: “anger, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication”; as he also says below: “Let us, having put off the old man with his deeds, put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.” Of the Christian Faith 5.14.175–76.34

Restore the Creation.

Gregory of Nyssa: And even so we say that the true and perfect soul is the human soul, as is clear from the very nature of its operations in both sensory power and intellect. Anything else that shares in life, because it possesses the power of growth, we call animate by a sort of customary misuse of language,

because in these cases the soul does not exist in a perfect condition.... Thus Paul, advising those who were able to hear him to lay hold on perfection, indicates also the mode in which they may attain that object. He tells them that they must “put off the old man” and put on the man “which is renewed after the image of him that created him.” Now may we all return to that divine grace in which God at the first created man, when he said, “Let us make man in our image and likeness.” ³⁵ On the Making of Man 30.33–34.³⁶

In the Mind, the Inner Person.

Augustine: The renewal and reforming of the mind takes place “after God,” or “after God’s image”: it is said to be “after God,” to exclude one thinking it to be after some other creature; and “after God’s image,” to make it plain that the renewal is effected in the place where God’s image is, that is, in the mind. On the Trinity 14.16.22.³⁷

3:11 *Christ is All and in All*

The Final Perfection.

Gregory of Nazianzus: But God will be all in all ³⁸ in the time of restitution; not in the sense that the Father alone will be, and the Son be wholly resolved into him, like a torch into a great pyre, from which it was pulled away for a short time and then put back ... when we shall be no longer divided (as we are now by movements and passions) and containing nothing at all of God, or very little, but then we shall be entirely like God, ready to receive into our hearts the whole God and him alone. This is the perfection to which we press on. Paul himself indeed bears witness to this. Orations 30.6.³⁹

3:14 *Love Binds Everything in Perfect Harmony*

Without Love, Nothing Is Possible.

Chrysostom: Now what Paul wishes to say is that there is no benefit in those things, for all those things fall apart, unless they are done with love. This is the love that binds them all together. Whatever good thing it is that you mention, if love be absent, it is nothing, it melts away. The analogy is like a ship; though its rigging be large, yet if it lacks girding ropes, it is of no service. Or it is similar to a house; if there are no tie beams, of what use is the house? Think of a body. Though its bones be large, if it lacks ligaments, the

bones cannot support the body. In the same way, whatever good our deeds possess will vanish completely if they lack love. Homilies on Colossians 8.⁴⁰

Severian of Gabala: When love does not lead, there is no completion of what is lacking; but, where love is present we abstain from doing evil to one another. Indeed we put our minds in the service of doing good, when we love one another. Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church.⁴¹

3:16 Teach and Admonish One Another

The Christian Sage.

Chrysostom: Nothing is wiser than the person who lives virtuously. Observe how wise he is, says one. He gives what he owns, he is compassionate, and he is loving to all. He has understood well that he shares a common human nature with others. He has thought through how to use his wealth wisely. He realizes the position of wealth makes him no one special. He knows that the bodies of his relatives are more valuable than his wealth. The one who despises glory is wholly wise, for he understands human affairs. This is genuine philosophy, the knowledge of things divine and human. So then he comprehends what things are divine and what are human. From the one he keeps himself, and to the other he devotes his labors. And he also knows how to thank God in all things. He considers the present life as nothing; therefore he is neither delighted with prosperity nor grieved with the opposite condition. Homilies on Colossians 9.⁴³

3:17 Giving Thanks to God the Father

Nothing Unclean.

Chrysostom: For if we act this way, there will be nothing polluted, nothing unclean, wherever Christ is called on. If you eat, if you drink, if you marry, if you travel, do all in the name of God, that is, calling him to help you: in everything first pray, then conduct your business. Homilies on Colossians 9.⁴⁴