

# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

We struggle to defeat our sin.

Rather than being gentle... and kind... with others, we are often harsh and critical...

Rather than having peace and contentment we are full of envy and bitterness ...

We struggle to gain consistent self-control over inner thoughts and desires.

We are slow to forgive and quick to condemn.

We too experience frustration and disappointment over our failure to be more like Christ.

This frustration can be a healthy sign of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts to move us to a stronger devotion.

But sometimes our frustration can be the result of our own pride.

Last week, we saw that a desire for a deeper experience of God can lead us away from Christ.

This week, we will see that our desire for victory over the sins of the flesh can also lead us to turn away from Christ.

We can be led to think that the various human activities that we do are more important in our conquering sin than what Christ has already done. Of course, there is a place for our striving. But we must remember as Martin Luther wrote, "but if the right Man were not on our side, our striving would be losing."

It is right to hunger and thirst for holiness. But we must be careful to seek that holiness living by faith alone in Christ alone.

How does Paul encourage this?

In short, he tells them to remember that they have been baptized into Christ.

And baptism into Christ declares that God has already severed them from their sinful nature.

Baptism functions like a standard or flag in an army. The soldier is taught that he belongs to a unit. He learns about the privileges and duties of that accompany being a member of that unit. The standard becomes a symbol of all that it means to belong to that unit.

During the battle, when chaos is swirling all around, the soldier looks to the standard for courage and strength. If the flag were to fall, then the nearest soldier is to pick it up and lift it high again.

In truth, the flag is nothing but a piece of cloth. But to the disoriented soldier looking for courage and strength to continue in the battle, the standard is much more.

Of course, he could take the time to think through all the things he learned in basic training about his unit and his being a member of this unit. But how much easier is it to simply look to the flag, knowing that it represents all those things all at once.

In preaching, you are continually learning the details of what it means to be under the standard of Jesus Christ. In baptism, all that you have learned is portrayed to you at once. Without faithful preaching, baptism has little to offer. But along with the faithful preaching of God's Word, baptism pulls that teaching into one grand symbol, evoking within you greater hope and inspiring renewed faith.

As you wage war against spiritual forces of evil...

As you strive to conquer your sin...

# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

God wants you to look to the standard of baptism.  
He wants you to use your baptism as a way of keeping your eyes fixed on Christ.

Read Colossians 2:11-15.

Skip down to the end of v. 23.

**Colossians 2:23** they (all those other things that you want to add to Christ) are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Human religion, human striving, does not have the power to stop you from sinning.  
You cannot use your flesh to conquer your flesh.

If you want to know what is of value in defeating your sin, you must keep looking to Christ, and your union with Christ.

It is only in Christ that your flesh has been severed from you.

<sup>11</sup> In him also  
you were circumcised  
with a circumcision made without hands,  
by putting off the body of the flesh,  
by the circumcision of Christ,

In Christ, you were circumcised. That is the driving thought of this whole passage.  
In Christ, you were severed from the body of flesh – that which drives you to sin.

How does Paul know this?

Because the Old Covenant sign of circumcision taught God's people to expect the Messiah to sever God's people from their sin.

Where does Paul learn this about circumcision?

From the sign itself – Circumcision is a cutting away of the flesh of the foreskin.

But the book of Deuteronomy, explains how the physical cutting away of flesh, signified the cutting away of the stubborn heart of rebellion.

**Deuteronomy 10:16** <sup>16</sup> Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

In this verse, we see that everyone who was physically circumcised had a duty to also be circumcised in the heart, in other words to not be stubborn in your rebellion to God. Physical circumcision was like a perpetual call to repent from your sin.

But God's covenant love does not simply command his people to repent. In God's great mercy, He promises to give freely that which He has commanded.

**Deuteronomy 30:6** <sup>6</sup> And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Paul understands that what is promised in Deuteronomy 30:6 was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

Left to themselves, God's people would always live out their lives in stubborn rebellion. The command to repent would always be ignored by us.

So, God promises to do the work of "circumcising". God takes it upon Himself to sever our sin from us. The result of God's powerful work will be that we will "love the LORD our God with all our heart and with all our soul".  
In other words... "that we may live".

Repentance and new life does not begin with us. It begins in God's covenant love, and in the work of God in Jesus Christ.

Paul knows that the spiritual hope of the circumcision of the heart has now become a present reality in Christ.

Paul fills up the cup of baptism with truth learned from the covenant sign of circumcision.

Believers are circumcised in their union with Christ and His circumcision.  
Look closely at verse 11. Understanding Paul's meaning is easy to miss.

11       **In him** (Jesus Christ) also  
                  you were circumcised  
  with a circumcision made without hands,  
                                  by putting off the body of the flesh,  
                                  by the circumcision of Christ,

Who does the circumcising?

And when and how were we circumcised?

Paul tells us explicitly that it was a circumcision "made without hands".

We therefore can be certain that it was not something done by men.

It was NOT the hands of the pastor that baptized you that severed you from your sin.

But neither was it the act of your will in being baptized that severed you from your sin.

It was a severing that was performed by God Himself.

In Deuteronomy 30:6, it is Yahweh who makes the promise. So, it is God who severs you from your sin.

How does God sever us from our sin?

by putting off the body of the flesh, (Literally: in the stripping off of the body of flesh)  
by the circumcision of Christ (Literally: in the circumcision of Christ)

The question of these two phrases is whether they refer to an act performed directly upon us as believers or whether they refer to an act performed upon Christ.

The question is not easy to answer. The Greek can be translated both ways. Translators are divided.

The NIV sees the two phrases as referring to an act performed by Christ upon the believer.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Colossians 2:11** In him you were also circumcised,  
in the putting off of the sinful nature,  
not with a circumcision done by the hands of men

# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

but  
with the circumcision done by Christ,

The King James Version takes the same approach.

<sup>KJV</sup> **Colossians 2:11** In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands,  
in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh  
by the circumcision of Christ:

But the Christian Standard Bible leans more to thinking that the action performed by God was directly upon Christ.

<sup>CSB</sup> **Colossians 2:11** In Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not done with hands,  
by putting off the body of flesh,  
in the circumcision of the Messiah.

There is no question that a personal severing in the heart of the believer must occur for salvation. Jesus taught Nicodemus, "You must be born again... born of the Spirit." And in Romans 2:29, Paul teaches explicitly that "circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit,"

But I am convinced that Paul's focus here is on an action that God performed upon Jesus in His crucifixion and death.

Why do I think this?

First, our circumcision occurs "in Him." "In Him" you were circumcised.

Secondly, the phrase "body of flesh" is not a phrase that Paul uses to describe our sinful nature. "putting off the body of flesh" is not how Paul describes the work of the Spirit in our hearts.

But it is a phrase that Paul uses to describe the human nature of Jesus Christ.

He used this very phrase in chapter 1 to describe the death of Jesus Christ.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Colossians 1:21**

<sup>21</sup> And you,  
who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,  
he has now reconciled  
in his body of flesh  
by his death,

Colossians 1:21 and Colossians 2:11 are parallel thoughts.

Just as God reconciled us to Himself, as Jesus' physical body hung on the cross, so God has severed us from our sin in Jesus' death.

We were circumcised "in Christ" as he breathed His last breath.

As Christ was dying, we were dying in Him.

Understanding this phrase helps us to better understand the next phrase "in the circumcision of Christ."

This phrase is best taken to mean the circumcision that was done to Christ – namely His death on the cross.

The personal severing of our sinful heart "by the Holy Spirit" is the fruit of our being included in Christ's death.

# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

The severing of our sinful heart is the fruit of our union with Christ in God's act of stripping off his body of flesh.

This is a fine distinction, and I would not make it if I did not think that mattered to your faith.

It is important for you to see that your personally being severed from sin (a work of the Holy Spirit in you) is not the source of your salvation. The work of God in your heart is still incomplete.

How can we know that the imperfect work in our heart will one day be completed?

We can be confident of this because the imperfect work that is ongoing in you is the fruit of the perfect work accomplished in Christ 2,000 years ago.

While Jesus walked this earth, he experienced temptation in His physical body. The Bible goes so far as to say that He was tempted in every way, just as we are. Incredibly, He went His entire life without ever sinning. But as Jesus breathed His last breath, the "body of flesh" was stripped off Him. That body lay silent in the grave and on the third day was raised immortal.

No temptation to sin will ever reach Jesus again.  
His victory over sin is complete.

Now, before any personal work of severing took place in you, you were already severed from your sin "in Christ."

When you are tempted to think that your sin is unconquerable and will never be defeated, you should remind yourself that it has already been defeated "in Christ".

He has conquered sin and death as your Covenant Head.  
This is why Jesus told His disciples at the institution of Communion: This is the New Covenant "in my blood."

When Christ was circumcised on the cross, you were circumcised.  
You are "in Him", and being "in Him" means that what happened to Christ also has happened to you.

The Shorter Catechism makes a distinction between Justification and Sanctification.  
Justification is a completed act that cannot ever be improved.  
Sanctification is an ongoing and progressive work in you. It is never perfect in this life.  
But Paul is saying here that the ongoing progressive work of sanctification in you is grounded in a completed and perfect act of God's circumcising Jesus Christ on the cross.

You have been circumcised in Christ!  
You have not been "kinda" circumcised in Christ, as if the work of circumcision was some sort of botched job.

If verse 11 was referring to our personal heart transformation, that would have to be the conclusion. Because every one of you continues to fight against the evil of your old nature. If your old nature has been severed, then you should not be struggling with it anymore.

# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

But the fact of the matter is we, like the Colossians, continue to struggle with our sin throughout our lives in this world.

Paul is giving hope to the Colossians by informing them that they are united with Christ, and being united with Christ they are joined with Christ in the perfect circumcision performed upon Him in His death.

So, instead of fretting about the current imperfection of the Spirit's work in your heart, get your eyes upon Christ and the perfect severing from sin accomplished in Him.

Verse 12 begins mid sentence. We should begin the sentence with "You were circumcised in Him"...

12        having been buried  
              with him  
                      in baptism,  
              in which you were also raised  
              with him  
                      through faith  
                                  in the powerful working of God,  
                                  who raised him from the dead.

Notice the repetition of "with him" in v. 12.

Christ continues to be the object of Paul's focus. We are only in view as we are considered "in Him." "having been buried" is something that was done "to" Christ, not an action that He did upon us. We were buried, but only "in Him", in His burial.

Paul does not merely say, "Christ buried your sin in the same way that He was buried physically." He says that, "in the burial of Jesus, you were also buried."

You were circumcised in the death of Christ.  
You were buried in the burial of Christ.  
You were raised in the resurrection of Christ.

Not everyone in the world has a right to believe that they are "in Christ" and have been severed from their sin in Him.

Only those who are members of God's visible Church have a right to believe this about themselves. How do we become a member of God's visible Church?

In verse 12, Paul gives us two answers, but in reality they are only one answer.

You are in Christ:

1. By/In baptism
2. Through faith

What baptism is Paul talking about?

This is not an easy question to answer.

1. Is he talking about water baptism?
2. Is he talking about spiritual baptism – ie. Regeneration and conversion?

# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

The argument against water baptism stems from the connection with circumcision. Since the circumcision was performed without hands, then the baptism must also be one that is performed "without hands."

Therefore "having been buried" must refer to the work of the Spirit killing our old nature. I am not so convinced.

We have been buried and raised "in our union with Christ".

This is certainly a spiritual reality. But it is not clear that Paul is referring to the spiritual reality when he says, "in baptism".

He could be referring to Christ's death "as a baptism".

In the Gospels, Jesus refers to His approaching death as a baptism.

But Paul could also be referring to their having received the covenant sign of baptism.

Even if Paul was thinking of "spiritual baptism" the outward physical sign cannot be treated as if it has no relevance. The physical sign and the reality are joined because God has joined them.

My level of certainty is not that high. But I lean toward Paul's referring to the physical sign of baptism. "In baptism, you were united to Jesus Christ in His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection."

This makes perfect sense with the following statement that it is "through faith."

The Bible consistently speaks of our being united to Jesus Christ by "faith".

And physical baptism and faith were viewed together as one.

The preaching of the Gospel was a call to faith in Christ, and those who believed were then baptized with water.

**Acts 2:38** <sup>38</sup> And Peter said to them, "Repent (faith is assumed) and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When people responded to the Gospel in faith, they were also given the covenant sign of water baptism. So, it makes sense in this passage, as Paul is trying to convince the Colossians to remember their "union with Christ", that he would point them both "to baptism" and "to faith", not as separate events, but as one.

Faith lays hold of what baptism into Christ declares.

And your baptism into Christ declares your perfect and complete severing from sin.

Physical baptism is not merely an outward sign of the initial work of the Spirit in your conversion.

It is a sign of the perfect work of Christ.

Your baptism does not primarily point you back to the imperfect work of severing that has already occurred in you personally, but to the perfect work performed on Christ, of which you are now included.

The faith that you have is not in what God has partially done in you. The faith that you have should be focused upon Jesus, who was raised up to the highest heaven and is seated there in perfect victory.

# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

The powerful working of God exercised in raising Jesus from the dead is now yours “in Christ.” They are not two different powers.

Your baptism with water declares to you that Jesus’ being raised with power and your being raised with power are united. Jesus is now seated on the heavenly throne.

And because you are “in Him”, you also are seated with him.

Look at Colossians 3.

**Colossians 3:1-3** If (since) then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

How do you know that you have been raised with Christ?

Because your baptism into Christ declares it to you.

Every aspect of your growth in Christ flows from your union with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection.

Back in Colossians 2:13.

13           And (so)  
          you,  
                  who were dead  
                      in your trespasses  
                      and  
                      the uncircumcision of your flesh,  
          God made alive  
                  together with him,  
                      having forgiven us all our trespasses,  
14                   by canceling the record of debt  
                          that stood against us  
                              with its legal demands.  
                      This he set aside,  
                          nailing it to the cross.

If there is any spiritual life in you today, it is because you are united to Christ and God has made you alive with him.

The uncircumcision of your flesh probably refers to sinful unbelief: the life before faith, and before baptism.

Paul states to the Colossians, “God has made you alive!”

This is what your baptism into Christ tells you!

You have been made alive.

Even while you are wishing that you had more present victory over sin, your baptism points you to the power of Christ’s resurrection over this body of flesh.

You have not merely been given life.

You are alive in Him, in His life.



# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

What frees God to give you resurrection life, rather than the condemnation of the Law?  
It is that the record of debt that stood against you has been canceled.  
Your sins, all of them, have been nailed to the cross, and you are now forgiven in Him.

This forgiveness is essential in ways that you may not have thought. Often we speak of God's wrath having been removed. Of course, this is the main thing. But Paul speaks about another way in which our forgiveness is essential.

Our forgiveness disarms the spiritual forces of evil that ruled our existence prior to our being brought to faith in Christ.

Those spiritual forces of evil have been disarmed, or even better – stripped naked and led in a triumphal procession.

15                   He disarmed the rulers and authorities  
                          and  
                          put them to open shame,  
                                  by triumphing over them  
                                  in him.

As you fight against the sins of your flesh, you must remember that you have already been severed from your sin. You have also been buried and are now raised up to the heavenly throne through your union with Jesus Christ. This is declared to you in baptism.

Are you weighed down by sin?  
Do you despair that you will conquer your anger, your pride, your envy, your lust, your discontentment, your greed, your harshness, your selfishness, your ...  
Does the putting off your sin seem impossible?  
Your baptism declares to you that you have already been severed from your sin, perfectly.

Do you despair that you will ever be able to live the Christian life?

Does living a life full of "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience," ...  
A life in which you freely bear with the faults of others, forgiving as you have been forgiven, full of love and harmony with the rest of God's people...

... seem impossible?

Your baptism declares to you that you have been raised up with Christ, together with all the saints.  
And His resurrection power is yours in Him.

Do you still fear the evil powers of this world?  
No problem, your baptism declares to you that these powers have been stripped naked led in shame behind the victorious Jesus Christ.

On the one hand, your baptism is nothing more than water.  
But on the other hand, your baptism is so much more.  
It is that standard, pointing you to Christ, and your being "in Christ."

# In Christ: Severed From Your Sin

Colossians 2:11-15

Tuesday night we will celebrate the Reformation. I hope you will come.

On the eve of the Reformation, it is only appropriate to end with the thoughts of two great Reformers: Martin Luther and John Calvin.

If you know anything about Luther, you know that he was a man of terrible internal struggle.

It is said that because of his internal struggle with sin and Satan, Luther would often go around in the house saying: "I am baptized! I am baptized!"

Do not think for a moment that Luther saw baptism as a sort of talisman or good luck charm. In his treatise on baptism, he writes these words.

"For this reason we must hold boldly and fearlessly to our baptism, and hold it up against all sins and terrors of conscience, and humbly say: 'I know full well that I have not a single work which is pure, but I am baptized, and through my baptism, God, who cannot lie, has bound himself in a covenant with me, not to count my sin against me, but to slay it, and blot it out'" (Treatise on Baptism).

John Calvin values baptism in a similar way. He writes in his Institutes of Christian Religion.

"We must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once and for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins" (Institutes, IV.15.3).

Remember your baptism.

May it seal to your heart Christ's victory over your sin.

May you be strengthened in your battles knowing that you have already been severed from your sin – together with Him.