



COLOSSIANS

BIBLE STUDY MANUAL

*Colossians Fall Bible Study
materials written by
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Week 1

Read: Colossians 1:1-2

Text of Colossians 1:1-2

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ²to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.

Original Meaning:

Before getting into these two opening verses, a few introductory words about Colossians are necessary. This letter was written by the apostle Paul from prison to a congregation in Asia Minor in the early 60s AD. Rome was the world power at the time, and various religious practices were in effect throughout most of the Roman Empire (pantheism, emperor worship, Judaism, Christianity, and even magic/sorcery). Christians in Paul's day had to face these challenges head-on as many of them made their way into the church and Christian practice. "Syncretism" is the term for combining beliefs and practices from more than one religious system together to form a new practice. This is what the Colossians were in danger of and it is why Paul composes this timely letter, to help them see their error and to present Jesus as supreme over all religious systems.

Paul's typical pattern in ministry was to write to a congregation that he founded on his journeys to check in on them and offer pastoral wisdom. However, we don't believe that Paul actually began the Colossian church (it was likely Epaphras, who is mentioned in 1:7-8; also see 2:1). As a result, if an audience doesn't know Paul well, he usually takes a moment to identify himself personally and give his credentials. We see this in the opening verse: Paul is "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." Paul is not only an official ambassador commissioned by Jesus (see Acts 9) but he is engaging in his ministry according to God's will, not his own. These two points are similarly made in Galatians 1:11-12 as well: "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."

After establishing himself, Paul mentions his co-author and missionary partner, Timothy. He is mentioned in the opening of a number of Paul's letters and remained a close friend and spiritual brother to Paul throughout Paul's life. In fact, the last letters Paul writes before his death are addressed to this young

believer (1-2 Timothy). Verse 2 identifies the recipients as being in Colosse but also that they are holy and faithful. Then, Paul gives the common greeting of "grace and peace." Often overlooked, these two grand theological concepts are central to the gospel message. "Grace" is God's divine favor on sinful human beings while "peace" encompasses his ideal for us which involves completeness, fullness, and goodness.

Bridging the Context:

The contemporary church struggles with many of the same issues that plagued the earliest churches we read about in the New Testament. Like the Colossians, we can be tempted to combine our worship of God with worship of other things and think it's ok. Sometimes this goes unnoticed or unchecked. Other times, as in the Colossians' case, it takes the form of giving in to the culture. Cultural beliefs and practices work their way into our churches and our worship, then take root in our thinking, and at some point become fact for us. The problem here is that we allow these things into our minds without filtering them through the lens of Scripture. This is destructive, and it is precisely why Paul is writing to the Colossian church. Therefore, we should take notice of this and seek to reflect on how this might be impacting our own worldview.

Contemporary Significance:

Letter openings are a wonderful reminder of the corporate work of believers. Paul is quick to give credit where it is due. Timothy was not only a valuable asset to Paul during his travels and his letter-writing, but he was often sent to various churches to carry his letters to them. The opening of Colossians reminds us of the fact that the Christian life is meant to be lived in isolation. Moreover, terms like "grace" and "peace" are used so frequently in Christian jargon that oftentimes we don't reflect on what they truly mean. Yes, these were a common greeting in early Christian circles, but that's because grace and peace can only be found in God our Father. Through Christ we have been brought into a new family with God as our Father, believers as brothers and sisters, and the church as our new family.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What issues plague the church today? What role does our culture play in causing division in the church and how can we address this?
2. How do the opening two verses of this letter prepare us for what's coming in the rest of the letter?
3. Talk about the role of God's grace and peace in your life.

Week 2

Read: Colossians 1:3-8

Text of Colossians 1:3-8

³We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—⁵the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel ⁶that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. ⁷You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, ⁸and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

Original Meaning:

In the Greek New Testament this passage is one long sentence! By grammatical standards today, Paul strings together one continuous run-on sentence. But a deeper look at the content of the verses shows that Paul builds on a word or concept to make a larger point. The best way to categorize this passage is as Paul's thanksgiving for the Colossian church and their ministry. Most biblical scholars believe that Paul had never been to Colosse when he wrote this letter, so the fact that he's thanking them for their vital ministry goes a long way in establishing rapport with them before he gets into the primary content of his letter.

If you read through the text a couple times you'll begin to notice the rich theological terms and themes Paul mentions: faith, love, hope, truth, gospel, grace, God, Lord Jesus Christ, and Spirit. Like the opening of a New Testament letter, the thanksgiving section often introduces themes that are later developed or referenced in the letter and Colossians is no different. Wright says that "The paragraph gives us a valuable insight into Paul's understanding of how God's grace operates."¹ Verses 4-5 center on faith, love, and hope. Paul is thankful because of their faith and love, but he goes on to state that these two are birthed from the hope they have. This hope is rooted in the gospel message which they heard and are now living out. But Paul goes further, and in verse 6 we discover that the Colossian believers are living out these three theological virtues because they first fully understood God's grace. If it weren't for his grace toward us, none of this would be true and the gospel would not be good news.

Part of the reason these believers have been steadfast and faithful is because they learned it from a faithful man who first proclaimed this gospel truth to

them—Epaphras (1:7–8). Paul probably didn’t begin this church, but based on what he says here it seems that Epaphras probably did. It is because of his faithfulness in proclaiming the gospel that Paul now sends this letter to encourage this group of believers.

Bridging the Context:

The primary reason Paul writes this letter is to address false teaching that has caused some deception and division in the Colossian church. So far in this letter, you really can’t tell based on the content. Genuine gratitude for others and for what God is doing goes a long way. Yes, this is Paul’s common practice in most of his letters, but we could all learn something from his approach. He doesn’t rush headlong into the main issue before he seizes the chance to encourage this struggling congregation with the foundational elements of the gospel. Moreover, he cites evidence of how they are changing the world by their faithful living and proclamation of the gospel. We would do well to learn from Paul’s example of gratitude.

Contemporary Significance:

In thanking the Colossians, Paul provides a basic framework of the gospel message and its proclamation. God’s grace is where it all begins (1:6). In a world full of evil and sin, the gospel of Christ brings hope (1:5). As a result, our faith in Christ leads to loving God and others (1:4).

Another point to consider from this text is the fact that the Christian life isn’t a solitary effort. Not only does Paul mention Timothy back in the opening verse of the epistle, he brings in Epaphras here to commend his faithful work in beginning the church at Colosse. Paul says that Epaphras told them of their faithful work (1:8), so there’s a larger missionary team involved. The work of advancing the gospel is a group effort. And the encouraging point from this text is Paul’s reminder that the gospel is spreading “all over the world” (1:6) and bearing fruit.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Discuss how faith and love spring forth from hope.
2. How can you incorporate more gratitude into your life? Who do you need to thank for their faithfulness to you and to God?
3. Spend time considering how you can share the gospel message this week. Think of specific people with whom you can share.

¹ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 53.

Week 3

Read: Colossians 1:9-14

Text of Colossians 1:9-14

⁹For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. ¹³For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Original Meaning:

In this passage Paul builds on the previous text by telling why he prays for the Colossian church and some of the content of that prayer. Central to his prayer is the “knowledge” of God and his will: “asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will” and “growing in the knowledge of God” (1:9-10). Proper knowledge of God is crucial because “it is this ‘knowledge’ which forms the basis both of holiness (v. 10) and of thanksgiving...and which is the central characteristic of the humanity that is now renewed in Christ (3:10).”¹ Knowledge, in fact, is a recurring concept throughout this letter because their knowledge of God is being assaulted with false teaching and doctrines. But Paul isn’t referring to some abstract, ethereal knowledge that can only be attained by a select few, this knowledge is accessible to all believers “through spiritual wisdom and understanding” (1:9) supplied by God. This rivals some of the pagan practices in their culture that suggested people could only know the divine realm by gaining access to secret knowledge, a line of thinking that eventually led to the practice of Gnosticism.

Knowledge, however, isn’t an end in itself. It should lead to correct living. This is where Paul goes next. Starting in verse 10 he jumps to the practical application of his prayer for their knowledge: that they would live consistent with the truth of the gospel and bear fruit in accordance with it. Specifically, Paul states that they are to “live a life worthy of the Lord.” In verses 10-12 he lists at least four ways they can live worthily of the Lord: bearing fruit in good works, growing in their knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father.

Paul's reflective prayer leads him to point out a major truth in the gospel story: God has rescued us from evil and brought us into his good kingdom through Jesus' act of redemption. This perspective on life is the correct way of thinking about their situation. It is the core of the knowledge they need about God to navigate the difficult situation at hand.

Bridging the Context:

Even though our cultures are separated by thousands of years, the church today still struggles with rightly understanding God. Our knowledge of him can oftentimes be incorrect or mixed with just enough error that it leads us and others astray. Paul's words in this passage offer a corrective for us when this is the case. We must proceed with extreme caution whenever we allow "voices" (media, pastors, authors, etc.) other than Scripture to speak to and influence us. Sometimes there is truth in what is said, but other times truth is mixed with small amounts of error that are difficult to detect. This was the case with the Colossians, and Paul boldly steps in to offer gentle correction.

Contemporary Significance:

Growing in spiritual maturity begins with a correct understanding of God. In other words, right thinking leads to right living. This is the essence of what Paul prays for the Colossian believers. Spiritual maturity is marked by a growing knowledge of God, active participation in living out the gospel, endurance, patience, and many other attributes. Knowledge shouldn't be pursued as an end in itself, it should lead to a more robust and rich understanding of the God we serve and should radically change our lives as we align our thinking and living with our Creator.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How can you grow in the knowledge of God? What are some practical steps or habits you can begin in order to achieve this?
2. What teachings or practices do you see in Christian culture today that might not align with Scripture? How can we go about addressing these issues?
3. Spend time in prayer thanking God for delivering you from "the dominion of darkness." Discuss how the redemption we have through Jesus should change our perspective on our circumstances.

¹ Wright, 61.

Week 4

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Text of Colossians 1:9-14

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Questions for Discussion:

1. How can you grow in the knowledge of God? What are some practical steps or habits you can begin in order to achieve this?
2. What teachings or practices do you see in Christian culture today that might not align with Scripture? How can we go about addressing these issues?
3. Spend time in prayer thanking God for delivering you from "the dominion of darkness." Discuss how the redemption we have through Jesus should change our perspective on our circumstances.

¹ Wright, 61.

Week 5

Read: Colossians 1:15-20

Text of Colossians 1:15-20

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Original Meaning:

This passage has the distinction of being one of the loftiest theological texts in the New Testament. Here, Paul outlines fundamental truths about Jesus and why he is not one god among many (as some may have thought in Paul's day) but supreme over all. It is important to note that in light of the false teaching Paul is addressing in this letter, he doesn't begin by detailing all the bad ideas or false presentations to be on guard against. Instead, he begins by presenting Jesus as the authentic standard against whom we compare everything or everyone else.

Simply put, Paul provides at least eight foundational theological truths that give evidence to Jesus' supremacy. First, he is God. He is "the image of the invisible God." In Jesus we can fully know, see, and experience God. Second, he existed before creation. When Paul says that Jesus was the "firstborn over creation" he uses this term to indicate not that Jesus was the first of all created beings (which would falsely imply Jesus hasn't always existed and that he was created) but to indicate rank. That is, Jesus resides as ruler over all the created order. Third, Jesus was involved in the act of creation ("through him all things were created"). Fourth, in him all creation has its proper place ("in him all things hold together"). So Jesus not only was involved in creation but he continually sustains all things. Fifth, all creation was made for him and to glorify him. Sixth, through the reconciliation he has accomplished we are now a new creation in him. Seventh, he has the unique role (because of who he is and what he's done) of being the head of the church, setting the faithful example of service, humility, and sacrifice. And eighth, because of his resurrection he is the first in the family of God to rise in power and mark the path of all successive believers.

Bridging the Context:

While many in Paul's day and in the Colossian church had different conceptions of Jesus and of his place among the pantheon of pagan gods, Paul sets the record straight here with a definitive and convincing list of reasons why Jesus is superior and sovereign. But as much as this text is about Jesus—and rightly so!—it is also about us and our role in this world. N. T. Wright comments that "Colossians 1:15-20 gives the church not merely an exalted view of Jesus, and hence of humanity, but of God and his world."¹ This passage helps us also see our role in this beautiful world God has created: agents of reconciliation. If all things have been made by and for Jesus, then as members of God's family our mission is to point everyone to him as the proper object of their lives and worship.

Contemporary Significance:

This text is singularly focused on why Christ should receive all the glory, why he is worthy of our lives, our thoughts, our time, and our worship. If we are created by him and for him, then we should live our lives to bring him glory (not ourselves). In this passage Paul also demonstrates that God is in the business of reconciliation. If we believe him and claim to know and follow him, then we also must be people of reconciliation. As we reflect on the supremacy of Jesus over all people and all creation, it should put the purpose of our lives in sharp focus. We were created to know him, love him, and love others. As new creations in Christ, we have a part to play in bringing about reconciliation. In doing so we continually are moving toward the perfect and complete ideal that characterized God's relationship with humankind before sin entered the world.

Questions for Discussion:

1. If Jesus truly is supreme over all, then why do we so quickly seek our own glory and fame? How can we go about eliminating selfishness and pride in our hearts?
2. How does this passage clarify your purpose on this earth? In what ways can you glorify God in your chosen vocation?
3. Paul lists a number of reasons why Jesus is supreme over all. Is there anything else you would add to his list? If so, why?

¹ Wright, 84.

Week 6

Read: Colossians 1:21-23

Text of Colossians 1: 21-23

²¹ Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²² But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— ²³ if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Original Meaning:

Having discussed the human condition on the large scale in the previous verses, Paul now makes his point personal: The Colossians were enemies of God by nature. Making matters worse, Paul won't even hear of the Colossians blaming someone else or fate for their actions. They were not mere victims of their circumstances, nor were they tricked into sinning. Much to the contrary, Paul says that the Colossians' minds were evil and turned against God. Since their minds were evil, they willingly engaged in evil actions. In short, the Colossians were enemies of God from start to finish, and no one was to blame but themselves.

Fortunately, Paul says that they are no longer God's enemies because God has acted. At this point, Paul reminds the Colossians that salvation is totally an act of God. The Colossians could not save themselves because they were evil from start to finish. What saved them was not their own good works. Instead, what saved them was the work of Christ. Through what he did in the Gospels and on the cross, he performed two works: he put sin away from believers and gave believers his righteousness. Based on Christ alone, the Colossians were righteous in the eyes of God.

The Colossians weren't entirely passive, however. In the final verse, Paul says that the benefits of Christ are theirs if they continue in the faith and cling to the gospel. The gospel message says that all humans are sinful, that Christ died for all people, and that anyone can be saved by calling on Christ's name. Paul told the Colossians that if they clung to this message, they would surely be saved.

Bridging the Context:

We live in a very different world from the Colossians, but we're like them in important ways. First, like the Colossians, all of us are sinners. Of all Christian doctrines, our view of the nature of human beings should be accepted by everyone. When we're honest with ourselves, all of us know that we make mistakes, both intentionally and unintentionally. As he said to the Colossians, Paul would tell us that our moral failures are not small or insignificant. Instead, moral failures are sins against God that make us his enemies. We, like the Colossians, are sinful from start to finish. We repeatedly choose to sin against God, and we alone are to blame.

Second, Jesus can save us like he saved the Colossians. Fortunately, Jesus doesn't tell us to save ourselves or to prepare ourselves before calling on him. Instead, salvation is entirely God's work. God takes us as we are, blemishes and failures and all. We also receive the same benefits as the Colossians. Jesus doesn't just forgive us for our sins; Jesus credits righteousness to us such that, if we call on him, we are without accusation before God. Luther called this alien righteousness, and it's a wonderful idea.

Like the Colossians, we aren't entirely passive. Instead, God calls us to cling to the gospel message for the rest of our lives. We aren't called to chase what feels right or whatever is popular. Instead, these verses teach us to plant our flag at the base of the cross of Christ and cling to the gospel no matter what may come. Here only will we find the solution to the problem of our own sinfulness.

Contemporary Significance:

1. Sin is the ultimate problem of human existence.
2. Jesus can save all people, no matter what they've done.
3. Those who are saved cling to the gospel.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Paul short circuits any attempt the Colossians might make to blame their sinfulness on their circumstances. Do you ever blame others for your own mistakes? How does accepting responsibility for your sins help you see the grace of Christ more clearly?
2. Paul teaches that we cannot save ourselves. What impact does this teaching have on your life? Does this worry you or cause you to feel a sense of relief? Which is more appropriate and why?
3. Paul stresses the need to cling to the gospel. What are some practical ways you can cling to the gospel message?

Week 7

Read: Colossians 1:24-29

Text of Colossians 1:24-29

²⁴ Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— ²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

Original Meaning:

Paul wrote the book of Colossians in chains. As he discussed in 2 Corinthians 11, Paul faced a lot of persecution and opposition during his ministry. While writing Colossians, Paul was experiencing persecution that led to his arrest. And yet, Paul was not upset, nor did he complain about his setting. Much to the contrary, Paul says that he rejoiced in his suffering. For Paul, to suffer in the Christian life is to be joined to Christ and to participate in Christ's redemptive suffering.

Paul tells us exactly why he was suffering: He was suffering for the riches of the gospel. Two facets of Paul's description of the gospel demand consideration. First, Paul says that the gospel is "the word of God in its fullness." Christ is the culmination of God's message to human beings. The Old Testament looks forward to Christ, the Gospels describe Christ, and the New Testament reflects on Christ. In Christ, the word of God has become complete. In other words, the entire Bible is about Jesus. Second, Paul says that the gospel is "the mystery." Paul calls the gospel a mystery because the gospel was hinted at in the Old Testament, yet no one fully understood the hints. Then, when God revealed the gospel in the New Testament, the gospel seemed so obvious that we wonder how Jesus's contemporaries misunderstood it. The gospel has always been God's plan, and God has always worked to accomplish his mission as defined by the gospel. Paul has indeed ventured into deep waters.

Paul concludes by pointing to the exceeding worth of the gospel. Because of the value of the gospel, he refuses to shy from persecution, and he refuses

to take the easy way out. Instead, he worked with all his might to reveal the knowledge of Christ to a dying world.

Bridging the Context:

Fortunately, being arrested for the gospel isn't something we think about very often in the United States. However, considering Paul's unapologetic ministry in the teeth of persecution ought to challenge us. Why, exactly, was Paul so bold while we are content to be so tame in our witness?

Perhaps Paul would argue that we don't understand the gospel he preached. Paul's ministry flowed from the deep admiration he had for the gospel. Paul understood all of human history in light of the gospel. We, on the other hand, are all too willing to place the gospel in isolation. We limit our religious practices to Sunday mornings and, if we're really devoted, to a few Wednesday nights. We're content to go to class with others who don't know Christ personally, and we're relatively unaffected by the lostness in our world. One wonders what Paul would say to us.

May we learn to imitate Paul by reflecting on the surpassing worth of Christ crucified. May we really believe that life is pointless if it's not lived in Christ, and that all who live apart from Christ are living in fantasy land. When we see the true value of the gospel, we will be compelled to understand all of life in light of the cross.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How would you respond to suffering for the gospel? If we're not living faithful, obedient lives apart from persecution, do we have any reason to think we'd live faithfully and obediently in the face of persecution?
2. Paul ventures into deep waters in this passage. Are any of the ideas unclear to you? How do these deep ideas affect the way you understand who you are, the nature of the world, and how you ought to live? Discuss the ideas of the gospel being the fullness of God's word and the mystery of God.
3. American Christians do not suffer for the gospel in the same way that Paul suffered for the gospel. Given the fact that the New Testament predicts that we will suffer for the gospel, how should we think about our relative lack of suffering? Historically, persecuted churches are much healthier and grow much more quickly than non-persecuted churches. Tertullian went so far as to say that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Is there a connection between persecution and spiritual health?

Week 8

Read: Colossians 2:1-5

Text of Colossians 2: 1-5

¹I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. ²My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. ⁵For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

Original Meaning:

In this passage, Paul shares his mission with the believers in Colossae. First, he shows the scope of his mission. Paul says that his labors were on their behalf. Furthermore, he says that his labors were also for the Christians living in Laodicea, a city about 10 miles from Colossae. Even while absent from the Colossians, Paul says that he is still working on their behalf and on the behalf of the believers in their area. However, Paul says that the scope of his ministry is far broader. He is working for the Colossians, the Laodiceans, and for every other person.

Second, Paul tells the Colossians what he hopes others will gain from his ministry. He hopes that others will be encouraged by his ministry and united to their fellow believers in love. Paul did not see the Christian life as something a person could accomplish on their own. Much to the contrary, he hoped that his ministry would promote unity within and between local churches.

Paul was quite clear about the basis for Christian unity. He tells the Colossians that the encouragement and unity he hopes to promote rests on the sure foundation of Christ. Not only does Christ provide the only basis for Christian unity, but he is also the repository of wisdom and knowledge. By this, Paul means that the Incarnation of Christ is the center point of human history. In Christ, all things make sense, and apart from Christ, all is vain.

Paul concludes with a warning that he will develop in the coming verses. Since Christ is the repository of wisdom and knowledge, the Colossians need not see wisdom and knowledge elsewhere, for all else is vanity. Consequently, the Colossians should cling all the more firmly to the knowledge of Christ.

Bridging the Context:

We can read this passage in two different ways. On one hand, those who are already believers should read this passage as instructions for engaging in ministry. Like Paul, believers are called to minister to universal ministry. No person is too far, too sinful, or too bad off for the gospel. Indeed, to believe a person is beyond hope is to doubt the power and goodness of God. Surely we do not believe God can create the universe from nothing but is powerless to address a person's sin.

Furthermore, as in Paul's time, the content of Christian ministry is the gospel. We preach Christ and him crucified, for he is all that matters. Every ministry we perform must necessarily be downstream from the message of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. He provides the source of Christian unity and the lens by which we should understand the universe.

On the other hand, those who are not believers should read this passage as a grand invitation. When Paul says he was laboring on behalf of those who haven't met him, he meant us. We are the recipients of Paul's message, and we know the gospel, in part, because God used Paul to spread the gospel so broadly. Paul's goal for us is that we would come to see the glory of Christ and that, in seeing Christ, we'd be encouraged and united with other believers. May this be so! Finally, in Christ, we find all that we've spent our lives searching for, for he is the sole repository of knowledge and wisdom. To paraphrase Augustine of Hippo's famous line from his Confessions, God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are Christians ever guilty of thinking some people are too far gone? Why do we doubt the power, love, and goodness of God by thinking he cannot handle our loved ones and neighbors? Do you ever fear that you're too far gone for God to love? Where do you think these thoughts come from?
2. How does Christ provide a basis for unity among believers? How should believers handle disagreements within the church? Can you provide any examples of a time a church handled a disagreement well?
3. Discuss the idea that Christ is the sole repository of knowledge and wisdom. What do you think this means? How should Christians think about academic study outside of Scripture?

Week 9

Read: Colossians 2:6-8

Text of Colossians 2:6-8

⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. ⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

Original Meaning:

In verses 6–7, Paul states his thesis for the entire letter: faith and praxis are inextricably connected. As we’ve already seen, Paul warns the Colossians about a faith that begins the Christian life but doesn’t carry through until the end. He cautions against this approach to the Christian faith and encourages the Colossians to continue living in Christ. The commitment they made at their salvation was not a one-time decision. Much to the contrary, Paul argues that their salvation should shape the rest of their lives. They must continue in Christ.

Paul expands what it means to continue in Christ in verse 7. First, he says that the Colossians should be rooted and built up in Christ. In other words, the Colossians should reach deep into God’s word like a tree reaches deep into the earth. The tree is consequently able to withstand storms because of its deep, expansive root system. In the same way, the Colossians should strive for spiritual maturity to weather the storms of life. Second, Paul says they should be strengthened as they were taught. By this, he means that the Colossians should not pursue another gospel. Growth in the Christian life is not beyond the cross but into the cross. And finally, he says the Colossians should overflow with thankfulness due to the exceedingly great mercy of God as seen in the cross.

Paul concludes with the first of many warnings he will give throughout the rest of this letter. As we’ve seen, Paul fears that worldly desires from a variety of sources will make the Colossians waver in their faith. Though he will address other desires in coming verses, at this point, Paul focused on the role that philosophy—specifically, hollow and deceptive philosophy—can play in undermining the Christian faith. Paul does not warn against philosophy per se; instead, he warns against bad philosophy. The challenge for the Colossians, and for us, is in distinguishing hollow and deceptive philosophy from edifying and good philosophy. For the Colossians, the hollow philosophy was a strange hybrid of Jewish and Greek elements that combined a type of fatalism with rituals drawn from a misunderstanding of the Old Testament.

Bridging the Context:

Much of what Paul says in this short passage applies directly to us in the 21st century. The great temptation of our age is to cede ground to the advance of the hollow and deceptive philosophy of postmodern relativism. Unfortunately, the advances of relativism are slow and incremental, which makes them all the more insidious. Rather than becoming a professing postmodern, the temptation we face is to sequester our faith. For the most part, society is fine with us being Christians on Sundays as long as we're Christians only on Sundays. If we leave our faith in our pews, we can get along just fine. This approach to the Christian faith is the fruit of postmodernism. Were he alive today, Paul would remind us that faith and praxis are inextricably tied. The Christian faith cannot be for Sundays alone.

Paul calls us to a higher, more difficult lifestyle. The decision to live a public life for Christ is the decision to be counter-cultural. To withstand the pressures that come from living a fully incarnate Christian life will require that we follow Paul's advice in verse 7: be rooted in Christ, be strengthened in the faith, and overflow with thanksgiving. The wind and the waves will come, but if we're grounded in Christ, then we, like a mighty oak, will be able to withstand the storms.

The best way to avoid hollow and deceptive philosophy is to embrace the alternative offered by the Christian faith. While Paul provides preliminary sketches of what we'd now call a Christian worldview throughout the rest of Colossians 2, the Christian tradition has reflected on the implications of Paul's instructions for nearly 2,000 years. While we can't go into details here, one way to follow Paul's instructions is to embrace the robust worldview of the Christian faith. For the Christian, we have no need to go elsewhere seeking truth, for all truth is found in Christ.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think Christians separate their faith from the rest of their lives? Why? Are you guilty of separating your faith from your life? How can you have a faith that shapes all of your life? How can the church do a better job of connecting a person's faith to the rest of their lives?
2. Discuss the analogy of the tree. How can you reach deep into your faith as a tree reaches deep into the soil? How can you reach out into the world while remaining anchored like a tree?
3. Paul warns against hollow and deceptive philosophy. How can we identify philosophy that is hollow and deceptive?

Week 10

Read: Colossians 2:9-12

Text of Colossians 2:9-12

⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹ In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Original Meaning:

In this passage, Paul continues his warning against hollow and deceptive philosophy. Specifically, Paul shows how Christ is superior to the philosophical system tempting the Colossian believers. Paul shows the superiority of Christ in several ways.

First, Christ is superior to any rival because he is the incarnate Son of God. The idea of the fullness of the essence of God living in Jesus of Nazareth is truly amazing! In Christ, the immutable God takes on mutable human nature, the timeless one becomes bound by time, and the God who is never in need submits himself to the weaknesses of human nature. Paul wants the Colossians to realize that they do not need to search after wisdom in pagan philosophy, for Christ is the wisdom of God in human form, the mystery of the ages.

Second, Christ is superior because of what he can do for believers. Paul says that Christ can give the Colossians true circumcision. By this, Paul means that Christ alone can truly set his people apart and mark them as different from the world. The Colossians do not need to search for authentic faith in other places, for Christ alone can satisfy their desire for a relationship with God.

Finally, Christ forms a new community among those who follow him. The key features of this community are that the members all follow Christ, have been set aside by him, and have been baptized. In the gospel of Christ, the Colossians have found a new religious community to call home. Consequently, they do not need to seek a community anywhere else.

Bridging the Context:

This passage reminds us of all the benefits we find in the gospel of Christ. In short, the gospel alone can satisfy all of our needs and desires. We do not need to go anywhere else, for we will not find peace with God anywhere but in the gospel delivered to the saints.

We, like the Colossians, live in a society that does not accept the gospel. And, like the Colossians' culture, many in our culture believe the gospel is foolishness. Paul would have us remember what an amazing mystery the gospel is. The Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, became a human being for us and our salvation! In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself! While the world may consider the gospel foolish, for us, the gospel is the power and wisdom of God. As he did with the Colossians, Paul would have us reflect on the exceedingly deep mystery of the gospel.

Further, we should cling to the gospel because the gospel alone can redeem us. Every worldly philosophy has a method for achieving personal salvation. For the postmodern, personal salvation comes when we accept ourselves for who we are. Unfortunately, accepting ourselves in our weaknesses is not enough to set us at peace with God. While other systems vie for our attention, we should remember that the gospel alone can reconcile us with God.

Finally, the gospel gives us a new family. The church is not an accidental creation; instead, the church is the community formed by the Holy Spirit for the advancement of the kingdom of God before Christ's return. God calls us to be a part of a local church for the goal of seeing us walk in greater obedience to Christ.

Discussion Questions:

1. Reflect on how amazing the incarnation of Christ is. What does the incarnation reveal about how God feels about humanity? How should understanding the mystery of the incarnation lead us to worship differently? Should we live differently because of the incarnation? If so, how?
2. How do different religious groups propose finding peace with God? Why is the gospel the only way to find true peace with God?
3. How do you approach the local church? Do you believe the local church is an optional part of the Christian life, or do you believe the local church is essential to the Christian life? What does the New Testament say?

Week 11: Triumphant Forgiveness

Read: Colossians 2:13-15

Text of Colossians 2:13-15

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Original Meaning/Bridging the Context:

Almost all great teachers have thought in pictures; and here Paul uses a series of vivid pictures to show what God in Christ has done for men. The intention is to show that Christ has done all that can be done and all that need be done, and that there is no need to bring in any other intermediaries for the full salvation of men. There are three main pictures here.

- i. Men were dead in their sins. They had no more power than dead men either to overcome sin or to atone for it. Jesus Christ by his work has liberated men both from the power and from the consequences of sin. He has given them a life so new that it can only be said that he has raised them from the dead. Further, it was the old belief that only the Jews were dear to God, but this saving power of Christ has come even to the uncircumcised Gentile. The work of Christ is a work of power, because it put life into dead men; it is a work of grace, because it reached out to those who had no reason to expect the benefits of God.
- ii. But the picture becomes even more vivid. As the King James Version has it, Jesus Christ blotted out the handwriting of ordinances which was against us; as we have translated it, he wiped out the charge-list which set out all our self-admitted debts, a charge-list based on the ordinances of the law. There are two Greek words here on which the whole picture depends.
 - a. The word for handwriting or charge-list is *cheirographon*. It literally means an autograph; but its technical meaning--a meaning which everyone would understand--was a note of hand signed by a debtor acknowledging his indebtedness. It was almost exactly what we call an I.O.U. Men's sins had piled up a vast list of debts to God and it could be said that men definitely acknowledged that debt. More than once the Old Testament shows the children of Israel hearing and accepting the laws

of God and calling down curses on themselves should they fail to keep them (Exo.24:3; Deut.27:14-26). In the New Testament we find the picture of the Gentiles as having, not the written law of God which the Jews had, but the unwritten law in their hearts and the voice of conscience speaking within (Rom.2:14-15). Men were in debt to God because of their sins and they knew it. There was a self-confessed indictment against them, a charge-list which, as it were, they themselves had signed and admitted as accurate.

- b. The word for wiping out is the Greek verb *exaleiphein*. To understand that word is to understand the amazing mercy of God. The substance on which ancient documents were written was either papyrus, a kind of paper made of the pith of the bulrush, or vellum, a substance made of the skins of animals. Both were fairly expensive and certainly could not be wasted. Ancient ink had no acid in it; it lay on the surface of the paper and did not, as modern ink usually does, bite into it. Sometimes a scribe, to save paper, used papyrus or vellum that had already been written upon. When he did that, he took a sponge and wiped the writing out. Because it was only on the surface of the paper, the ink could be wiped out as if it had never been. God, in his amazing mercy, banished the record of our sins so completely that it was as if it had never been; not a trace remained.
- c. Paul goes on. God took that indictment and nailed it to the Cross of Christ. It used to be said that in the ancient world when a law or an ordinance was cancelled, it was fastened to a board and a nail was driven clean through it. But it is doubtful if that was the case and if that is the picture here. Rather it is this--on the Cross of Christ the indictment that was against us was itself crucified. It was executed and put clean out of the way, so that it might never be seen again. Paul seems to have searched human activity to find a series of pictures which would show how completely God in his mercy destroyed the condemnation that was against us.

Here indeed is grace. And that new era of grace is further underlined in another rather obscure phrase. The charge-list had been based on the ordinances of the law. Before Christ came men were under law and they broke it because no man can perfectly keep it. But now law is banished and grace has come. Man is no longer a criminal who has broken the law and is at the mercy of God's judgment; he is a son who was lost and can now come home to be wrapped around with the grace of God.

- iii. One other great picture flashes on the screen of Paul's mind. Jesus has stripped the powers and authorities and made them his captives. As we have seen, the ancient world believed in all kinds of angels and in all kinds

of elemental spirits. Many of these spirits were out to ruin men. It was they who were responsible for demon-possession and the like. They were hostile to men. Jesus conquered them forever. He stripped them; the word used is the word for stripping the weapons and the armor from a defeated foe. Once and for all Jesus broke their power. He put them to open shame and led them captive in his triumphant train. The picture is that of the triumph of a Roman general. When a Roman general had won a really notable victory, he was allowed to march his victorious armies through the streets of Rome and behind him followed the kings and the leaders and the peoples he had vanquished. They were openly branded as his spoils. Paul thinks of Jesus as a conqueror enjoying a kind of cosmic triumph, and in his triumphal procession are the powers of evil, beaten for ever, for every one to see.

In these vivid pictures Paul sets out the total adequacy of the work of Christ. Sin is forgiven and evil is conquered; what more is necessary? There is nothing that Gnostic knowledge and Gnostic intermediaries can do for men-- Christ has done it all already.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does it mean to be "alive in Christ?"
2. How does that look?
3. Have you ever considered the price that Jesus paid on the cross?
4. Considering that price, how then should we live?
5. In what ways are you failing? In what ways are you doing better? Where are areas in which you can improve?

Week 12: Freedom from Human Rules

Read: Colossians 2:16-19

Text of Colossians 2:16-19

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. ¹⁹They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

Original Meaning/Bridging the Context:

This passage has certain basic Gnostic ideas intertwined all through it. In it Paul is warning the Colossians not to adopt certain Gnostic practices, on the grounds that to do so would not be progress but rather retrogression in the faith. Behind it lie four Gnostic practices.

- i. There is Gnostic asceticism (Col. 2:16 and Col. 2:21). There is the teaching which involves a whole host of regulations about what can and cannot be eaten and drunk. In other words, there is a return to all the food laws of the Jews, with their lists of things clean and unclean. As we have seen, the Gnostics considered all matter to be essentially evil. If matter is evil, then the body is evil. If the body is evil, two opposite conclusions may be drawn. (a) If the body is essentially evil, it does not matter what we do with it. Being evil it can be used or abused in any way, and it makes no difference. (b) If the body is evil, it must be kept down; it must be beaten and starved and its every impulse chained down. That is to say, Gnosticism could issue either in complete immorality or in rigid asceticism. It is the rigid asceticism with which Paul is dealing here.

In effect he says, "Have nothing to do with people who identify religion with laws about what you may or may not eat or drink." Jesus himself had said that it made no difference what a man ate or drank (Matt. 15:10-20; Mk. 7:14-23). Peter had to learn to cease to talk about clean and unclean foods (Ac. 10). Paul uses an almost crude phrase which repeats in different words what Jesus had already said. He says, "These things perish as they are used" (Col. 2:22). He means exactly what Jesus did when he said that food and drink are eaten and digested, and then excreted from the body, and

flushed away down the drain (Matt.15:17; Mk.7:19). Food and drink are so unimportant that they are destined for decay as soon as they are eaten. The Gnostics wished to make religion a thing of regulations about eating and drinking; and there are still those who are more concerned with rules about food than about the charity of the gospel.

- ii. There is the Gnostic and the Jewish observation of days (Col. 2:16). They observed yearly feasts and monthly new moons and weekly sabbaths. They drew out lists of days which specially belonged to God, on which certain things must be done and certain things must not be done. They identified religion with ritual.

Paul's criticism of this stress on days is quite clear and logical. He says, "You have been rescued from all this tyranny of legal rules. Why do you want to enslave yourself all over again? Why do you want to go back to Jewish legalism and abandon Christian freedom?" The spirit which makes Christianity a thing of regulations is by no means dead yet.

- iii. There are the Gnostic special visions. The King James Version in Col. 2:18 speaks of the false teacher "intruding into those things which he hath not seen." That is a mistranslation. The correct translation should be "making a parade of the things which he has seen." The Gnostic prided himself upon special visions of secret things which were not open to the eyes of ordinary men and women. No one will deny the visions of the mystics, but there is always danger when a man begins to think that he has attained a height of holiness which enables him to see what common men--as he calls them--cannot see; and the danger is that men will so often see, not what God sends them, but what they want to see.
- iv. There is the worship of angels (Col. 2:18,20). As we have seen, the Jews had a highly-developed doctrine of angels and the Gnostics believed in all kinds of intermediaries. They worshipped these, while the Christian knows that worship must be kept for God and for Jesus Christ.

Paul makes four criticisms of all this.

- i. He says that this kind of thing is only a shadow of truth; the real truth is in Christ (Col. 2:17). That is to say, a religion which is founded on eating and drinking certain kinds of food and drink and abstaining from others, a religion which is founded on Sabbath observance and the like, is only a shadow of real religion; real religion is fellowship with Christ.
- ii. He says that there is such a thing as a false humility (Col. 2:18,23). When they talked of the worship of angels, both the Gnostics and the Jews would

have justified it by saying that God is so great and high and holy that we can never have direct access to him and must be content to pray to the angels. But the great truth that Christianity preaches is, in fact, exactly that the way to God is open to the humblest and the simplest person.

- iii. He says that this can lead to sinful pride (Col. 2:18,23). The man who is meticulous in his observance of special days, who keeps all the food laws and who practices ascetic abstinence is in very grave danger of thinking himself especially good and of looking down on other people. And it is a basic truth of Christianity that no man who thinks himself good is really good, least of all the man who thinks himself better than other people.
- iv. He says that this is a return to unchristian slavery instead of Christian freedom (Col. 2:20) and that in any event, it does not free a man from fleshly lusts but only keeps them on the leash (Col. 2:23). Christian freedom comes not from restraining desires by rules and regulations but from the death of evil desires and the springing to life of good desires by virtue of Christ being in the Christian and the Christian in Christ.

Discussion Questions:

1. How much freedom do we have as a Christian?
2. In what ways do you abuse this freedom?
3. What is the difference in legalism and love?
4. Examine yourself for a moment and think about areas in your life that need improving. What are they and what is your motivation to change?

Week 13: How Not to Be Godly

Read: Colossians 2:20-23

Text of Colossians 2:20-23

²⁰Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Original Meaning/Bridging the Context:

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, the problem of controlling sinful desires has plagued the human race. Whether you call it the flesh, the old nature, or indwelling sin, we all wrestle with strong internal temptations to do wrong. So, a very practical question is, "How can we keep the flesh in check?"

One answer, which is not limited to Christians, has been to treat the body harshly in an attempt to gain mastery over it. The Indian leader, Gandhi, stopped having sexual relations with his wife. Then, to prove his control over fleshly urges, he slept in the same bed with naked, beautiful young women, but never touched them. The Christian mystic, Origen, took literally the words of Jesus about becoming eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom and castrated himself. Christian monks have slept on boards, worn hair shirts, exposed themselves to extremes of heat and cold, lived on top of pillars, gone without bathing, fasted, and remained celibate in their attempts to deal with the flesh.

Even these Christian attempts to be holy probably strike us as really weird. We live in a culture where the motto is, "If it feels good, do it!" I haven't seen any best-sellers lately on "self-denial," unless it's a diet to help you look good so that you can snag the hunk or beauty queen that you're after!

In Colossians 2:20-23, Paul shows that asceticism is how not to become godly. The false teachers in Colossae had a system of rules which they imposed on their followers. They said, "If you keep these rules, you will have victory over fleshly desires." They took some of the Old Testament regulations concerning ceremonial cleanliness and diet and added to them, much as the Pharisees had done. Paul admits (Col. 2:23) that these rules had "the appearance of wisdom," but, he adds, they "are of no value against fleshly indulgence." Rather, Paul argues that ...

Godliness is not achieved through asceticism but through our identification with Christ.

When Paul writes (Col. 2:20), "If you have died with Christ," the Greek construction implies certainty, not doubt. Paul is asking the rhetorical question, "If you truly died with Christ and were raised up with Him, why are you going back, not just to the Old Testament law, but even worse, to manmade rules added to that law?"

Godliness is not achieved through asceticism.

What is asceticism? Webster (merriam-webster.com) defines it as "relating to or having a strict and simple way of living that avoids physical pleasure." The Oxford American Dictionary (oxforddictionaries.com) defines it: "Characterized by severe self-discipline and abstention from all forms of indulgence, typically for religious reasons."

But if asceticism is self-denial, then isn't it taught in the Bible? Paul said that he disciplined his body and made it his slave (1 Cor. 9:27). He instructed Timothy to endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 2:3) and to discipline himself for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7). Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). Jesus said that self-denial is an essential requirement for following Him (Matt. 16:24). So what's the difference between the asceticism that Paul attacks in this text and biblical self-denial or self-discipline? Here are a number of contrasts to consider:

Asceticism sees the body as evil, to be totally suppressed; self-discipline sees the body as good, but needing control.

These false teachers taught that matter is evil, but spirit is good. Thus, we must treat our bodies harshly. But the Bible teaches that as Christians, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we need to take care of our bodies and to glorify God with them (1 Cor. 6:19-20). To do this, we need to exercise control over what we eat and drink, over harmful substances such as tobacco and drugs, over sexual impulses, etc. But there is a basic difference in outlook toward the body between asceticism and biblical self-discipline.

Asceticism is submitting my body to my will; self-discipline is submitting my whole life to God's will.

The ascetic operates on will power. His goal is to bring his body under the control of his mind or spirit, as in Gandhi's ludicrous experiment. But Christian self-denial has a higher aim, namely, to glorify Jesus Christ by bringing my whole being into submission to Him. It is to renounce my control of my life and

to give that control willingly to Christ.

Asceticism labels all material things as evil; self-discipline properly uses and enjoys the things of the world.

Ascetics cannot enjoy material possessions. While as Christians, we must be generous and ready to share, and not fix our hope on material things, Paul taught that God "richly supplies us with all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. 6:17). Countering those who forbade marriage and advocated abstaining from certain foods, Paul said (1 Tim. 4:4), "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude." Christians can rightly enjoy all of life under the lordship of Christ, including a good meal, the beauty of God's creation, and the sexual relationship within marriage. Ascetics teach that such pleasurable enjoyment is wrong.

Asceticism views joy and pleasure as wrong; self-discipline allows for the fullness of joy and pleasure in God. Christians can legitimately enjoy God and all of His gracious gifts and blessings (Ps. 16:10). He wants our joy to be full (John 15:11; Ps. 5:11).

Asceticism is restrictive; self-discipline leads to greater freedom. Asceticism emphasizes all the things you cannot do: "Don't handle this; don't taste that; don't touch that!" It leads to a restrictive, repressive kind of life. But self-discipline is the key to liberty. The disciplined athlete is free to do things that others cannot do. The skillful musician has disciplined himself over hours of practice so that he is free to play a Beethoven symphony that we could never play. And the disciplined Christian has freedom in the Lord to obey Him and not to sin, which is always for our good.

Asceticism is aimed at obeying manmade commands; self-discipline is aimed at obeying God's commands.

Paul says that these false teachers were promoting the commandments and teachings of men. He probably had in mind Jesus' words when He denounced the Pharisees (Mark 7:7, citing Isa. 29:13), "But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." Jesus went on to tell them (Mark 7:9), "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition." Ascetics add things to the Bible in an attempt to be spiritual. In the Ten Commandments, God said to keep the Sabbath holy; the Pharisees came up with over 600 detailed commands to specify what they thought that meant. Jesus frequently attacked the Pharisees for their ridiculous Sabbath rules. Biblical self-discipline distinguishes between what God commands and what men add to God's commands.

Asceticism stems from the flesh and often leads to sin; self-discipline stems from the Holy Spirit and is a means to true godliness.

The Colossian heretics were “inflated without cause by [their] fleshly mind” (Col. 2:18). While it is difficult to translate Colossians 2:23, it most likely means that while the rules of the false teachers may seem to promote godliness, in actuality, they are “of no value against fleshly indulgence.” Many people erroneously think that legalism is on one end of the scale and licentiousness on the other end, with grace being the balance point in the middle. But actually, legalism and licentiousness are two sides of the same coin, because both operate in the flesh. Thus Jesus accused the legalistic Pharisees of being full of self-indulgence, all uncleanness, and lawlessness (Matt. 23:25, 27, 28). Their manmade rules and outward restrictions could not deal with the flesh. Only the Holy Spirit living in us can make us holy by producing His fruit of self-control (Gal. 5:23).

Asceticism is often motivated by gaining acceptance from God; self-discipline is motivated by assurance of being accepted by God.

The ascetic is often trying to make himself acceptable to God through harsh treatment of the body. By this he thinks he can atone for his sins or show enough contrition to merit God’s favor. But Christian self-discipline operates from the platform of knowing that God has accepted us in Jesus Christ on the basis of His grace. The motive behind self-discipline is not to gain His favor, but to be pleasing to the Lord because He loved me and died for me.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you encountered Christians who practice asceticism? Were they trying to recruit you? Did you try it? Did it work?
2. How would you counsel someone who is fighting a losing battle with lust? Their sexual identity?
3. Since self-discipline is a godly virtue, but asceticism is not, how can we know when we cross that line?
4. A Christian tells you, “In Christ, I may be dead to sin, but I don’t feel dead to sin!” How would you counsel him?

Week 14: The Risen Life

Read: Colossians 3:1-4

Text of Colossians 3:1-4

¹ If then you were raised with Christ, set your hearts on the things which are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ² Have a mind all of whose thoughts are fixed on the things which are above, not upon the things on earth. ³ For you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ Whenever Christ, your life, shall appear, then you too shall appear with him in glory.

Original Meaning/Bridging the Gap:

The point Paul is making here is this. In baptism the Christian dies and rises again. As the waters close over him, it is as if he was buried in death; as he emerges from the waters, it is like being resurrected to a new life. Now, if that is so, the Christian must rise from baptism a different man. Wherein is the difference? It lies in the fact that now the thoughts of the Christian must be set on the things which are above. He can no longer be concerned with the trivial passing things of earth; he must be totally concerned with the eternal verities of heaven.

We must note carefully what Paul means by that. He is certainly not pleading for an other-worldliness in which the Christian withdraws himself from all the work and activities of this world and does nothing but contemplate eternity. Immediately after this Paul goes on to lay down a series of ethical principles which make it quite clear that he expects the Christian to go on with the work of this world and to maintain all its normal relationships. But there will be this difference--from now on the Christian will view everything against the background of eternity and no longer live as if this world was all that mattered.

This will obviously give him a new set of values. Things which the world thought important, he will no longer worry about. Ambitions which dominated the world, will be powerless to touch him. He will go on using the things of the world but he will use them in a new way. He will, for instance, set giving above getting, serving above ruling, forgiving above avenging. The Christian's standard of values will be God's not men's.

And how is this to be accomplished? The life of the Christian is hidden with Christ in God. There are at least two vivid pictures here.

- i. We have seen repeatedly that the early Christians regarded baptism as a dying and a rising again. When a man was dead and buried, the Greeks

very commonly spoke of him as being hidden in the earth; but the Christian had died a spiritual death in baptism and he is not hidden in the earth, but hidden in Christ. It was the experience of the early Christians that the very act of baptism wrapped a man round with Christ.

- ii. There may well be a word play here which a Greek would recognize at once. The false teachers called their books of so-called wisdom apokruphoi, the books that were hidden from all except from those who were initiated. Now the word which Paul uses to say that our lives are hidden with Christ in God is part of the verb apokruptein, from which the adjective apokruphos comes. Undoubtedly the one word would suggest the other. It is as if Paul said, "For you the treasures of wisdom are hidden in your secret books; for us Christ is the treasury of wisdom and we are hidden in him."

There is still another thought here. The life of the Christian is hidden with Christ in God. That which is hidden is concealed; the world cannot recognize the Christian. But Paul goes on: "The day is coming when Christ will return in glory and then the Christian, whom no one recognized, will share that glory and it will be plain for all to see." In a sense Paul is saying—and saying truly—that someday the verdicts of eternity will reverse the verdicts of time and the judgments of God will overturn the judgments of men.

CHRIST OUR LIFE

In Col. 3:4 Paul gives to Christ one of the great titles of devotion. He calls him Christ our life. Here is a thought which was very dear to the heart of Paul. When he was writing to the Philippians, he said, "For me to live is Christ" (Php. 1:21). Years before, when he was writing to the Galatians, he had said, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal.2:20). As Paul saw it, to the Christian Christ is the most important thing in life; more, he is life.

This is the kind of peak of devotion which we can only dimly understand and only haltingly and imperfectly express. Sometimes we say about someone that, "Music is their life--Sports is their life--they live for their work." Such an individual finds life and all that it means in music, in sport, in work, as the case may be. For the Christian, Christ is their life.

And here we come back to where this passage started--that is precisely why the Christian sets his mind and heart on the things which are above and not on the things of this world. He judges everything in the light of the Cross and in the light of the love which gave itself for him. In the light of that Cross the world's wealth and ambitions and activities are seen at their true value; and, the Christian is enabled to set his whole heart on the things which are above.

Discussion Questions:

1. As Paul teaches us, Christians set their mind and heart on the things which are above and not on the things of this world. What are some things that are currently overwhelming and occupying your mind? Are these things considered "above" or of this world?
2. How is your heart today? Broken? At Peace? Sorrowful? Loving?
3. What are you most looking forward to when we are in "Glory" with The Lord?



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