

SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Week One: The Word Of Truth (Colossians 1:1-8)

Paul wrote his epistle to the Colossians during his first imprisonment in Rome. As the last part of Acts 28 explains, he was kept under house arrest, with some personal freedoms allowed. Paul used much of his time to teach about Jesus to those who visited him, and he also wrote many letters to believers in other cities. He wrote Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon during this time; and he also wrote other letters (such as a letter to Laodicea that he mentions in Colossians 4:16) that are not part of the inspired New Testament.

Paul greets the Colossian believers and expresses his warm thankfulness for them (1:1-4), because they hold a special meaning for him. They are among many groups of disciples, scattered across the Roman Empire, whose ongoing faithfulness and ministry give the imprisoned apostle some hope and joy. Although Paul must discuss some serious matters that are causing problems in Colosse, this in no way diminishes the encouragement that these Christians give him as brothers and sisters in Jesus.

We can learn from Paul's example, for we ourselves are easily discouraged or distracted by our own immediate concerns, so that we can lose our perspective, forgetting that there are countless other believers experiencing their own trials and their own victories, all of them equally precious to Jesus and to his Father.

The faithfulness and salvation of other believers give Paul many reasons to rejoice (1:5-8). Even if he himself can do little for them at the moment, he knows that the power for life and change never came from him anyway. It is not Paul's zeal or knowledge that has led so many persons to know Jesus. It is the gospel itself, brought to light by Jesus' gracious sacrifice of his own blood, and proven true by Jesus' resurrection, that brings salvation and other blessings to Jews and Gentiles alike. The truth of the gospel, not any method or leader or lesson that humans provide, is what brings salvation and life to other souls.

Thus Paul is not distracted by human methodologies or rivalries, although these were already problems in the early church of Christ. Paul does not get engrossed in following worldly events or in debating human controversies, even though he lived in a tumultuous era that saw upheavals on every scale. Where others saw things from a worldly point of view, Paul focused instead on the gospel of Christ, because then as now, "all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing".

Throughout the epistle, Paul will refer his readers back to Jesus and the gospel at every step. The answers to their problems will not be found in outward activity, or in human logic or theology, or in earthly leaders or experts. The same is true of our own needs. Whether we are faced with false teachers, as the Colossians were, or whether our needs are of a different nature entirely, the true answers are found in Jesus, in the cross, and in the gospel.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2010

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Week Two: We Have Not Stopped Praying (Colossians 1:9)

As we read through Colossians, we realize that all is not well with the Christians in Colosse. They have been disoriented by false teachers who are presenting a distorted view of God and of ministry. Yet Paul postpones dealing directly with this topic, focusing first on the positive truths of the gospel. Afterwards, he will try to bring the Colossian Christians back to the path of truth.

Making a brief overview of the epistle, we see that the apostle reminds them that everything must focus not on self but on Jesus, in whom we have redemption (1:9-14). He then discusses Jesus' identity as the firstborn over all creation (1:15-23), and he describes what he calls the "mystery" of Christ in us (1:24-29 - this contrasts with the superficial 'mystery religions being peddled by the false teachers). As Paul then confronts the false teachings that have plagued the Colossians, he emphasizes that the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ, not in human laws, leaders, or systems (2:1-8).

It is Jesus who was nailed to the cross for us (2:9-15); we died with him (2:16-23); and we have also been raised with Christ (3:1-10). Therefore it is Christ alone who is all, and who is in all (3:11-17). To focus on human wisdom or goodness is blasphemous - thus, whatever we do, it should be done for Jesus and through Jesus himself (3:18-4:1). Thus we must not fall into the habit of proclaiming the church, its programs, or its doctrines. Our proper ministry is to go about proclaiming the "mystery" of Jesus, his blood, and his resurrection (4:2-6). Only in this context can we properly understand "everything that is happening" in our world and in our lives (4:7-18).

So, when Paul prays for his many brothers and sisters in Jesus (returning to Colossians 1:9), he focuses on the things that matter most. Even when we diligently pray for those we care about, we do not always pray for their most important needs. Paul's example is significant, because he realizes that the Colossians need spiritual wisdom, and closeness with God, more than they need anything of purely earthly significance.

Most of our prayers for one another are for medical needs, financial needs, and the like. We should not cease to offer such prayers, knowing that in all these things it is God who has the wisdom to know what is best, and who has the power to bring it about. And it pleases God when our compassion for the sufferings and worries of others leads us to remember them in prayer.

Let us then add to these prayers a much stronger awareness of the even greater spiritual needs of those around us: their need for understanding, for forgiveness, for faith, for spiritual fervor. If we are sensitive to the bodily pains and fears of others, so that we urgently pray for them, should we not be far more urgent about the needs of their souls? If we worry about the physical and financial health of others, ought we not to be even more concerned that they find spiritual growth, truth, grace, and understanding? These things can keep them safe in God's grace and in God's presence for eternity, not just for this life.

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Week Three: A Life Worthy Of The Lord (Colossians 1:10-12)

As Paul is imprisoned in Rome, his thoughts are not on himself, but on the gospel and on the needs of others. He writes to the Christians in Colosse knowing that the church there is struggling with false and erroneous teachings. Yet he remains thankful for them, and seeks only to bring them back to the grace and truth of the gospel, not to scold them for getting off-track.

So, Paul's wish for his readers to live "a life worthy of the Lord" (1:10) is not a hope for them to gain accomplishments or victories - rather, it is a plea for them to gain a more spiritual perspective that will guide them to value and seek the things that matter to God, not the inferior things so valued by the worldly. They, and we, can only experience this by allowing Jesus to strengthen us inwardly, so that we allow him to influence our thoughts and feelings.

It is only by God's power that we can develop and experience the qualities that please God (1:11). We cannot become godly by simply willing ourselves to be more 'spiritual' or more 'zealous' or more 'religious'. The kind of heart that God desires can come only through humility and submission, never by human ambition or determination. Our own will power and fleshly zeal can produce an outward appearance of spirituality, which can often deceive both ourselves and others - but which cannot please God, regardless of the excitement or results that it produces.

Because our salvation is above all by grace, it can never be deserved; we can only have it because God's own righteousness qualifies us to receive his blessings (1:12). Since we can never merit or deserve God's grace, God's compassion, or God's blessings, we must accept them all with grateful humility. We should not try to prove that we deserve spiritual blessings, but instead should remain constantly grateful and humble before the God who gives us things of great value that we could never earn.

In any era, there will be persons like the ones who were troubling the believers in Colosse. There were many then, and there are many today, who emphasize methods, dos and don'ts, and human goodness. They think that they have 'found' a secret or a better way or a special way of doing things, and they often confuse those who are good-hearted but who lack understanding.

Do not ever allow yourself to be stampeded or rushed into accepting someone else's model for the church, for ministry, or for Jesus. All of us have great difficulty seeing these things clearly. We must especially resist the versions of 'Christianity' that most appeal to and excite our fleshly natures. The gospel of Christ is the same for all; and it is equally humbling for all.

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Week Four: Rescued From The Dominion Of Darkness (Colossians 1:13-14)

Though the Colossian Christians are being troubled by false teachers who are peddling 'mystery religion' instead of the gospel of Jesus, Paul has not yet addressed these errors directly. Instead, he reminds his readers at length of the things that most truly distinguish the gospel. Many of these things involve spiritual blessings of infinite value. Yet, to appreciate them we must also accept some grim truths that our flesh hates to hear about.

So the apostle now adds the crucial reminder that Jesus has saved us from lostness, death, and darkness (1:13). Too often we look at Christianity as a means of obtaining mere earthly benefits, forgetting how high the stakes truly are. If we need not be concerned for ourselves, then we ought still to remember that many others still live in spiritual darkness. And if we care for others and wish to help them, then we must first see this world for the empire of death that it is.

Believers must not delude themselves about the gravity of the danger from which they have been rescued by Jesus' blood. When Paul reminded both himself and others of the reprehensible things he did as an unbeliever, and called himself "the worst of sinners", this was no false modesty. And we too, even if we were not violent or hateful persons, must learn to see our own sins for what they are.

We must always remind ourselves that, for all the blessings and benefits that Jesus brings, the most essential one is forgiveness of sins (1:14). This is the most crucial need in our lives, because unforgiven sin is the one thing that can permanently separate us from God. The need is the same for all who have sinned; "there is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:22-24).

There is simply no such thing as a person who needs Jesus more than someone else needs him, or who needs Jesus less than someone else needs him. That Christians ever even think in such terms reveals the need for us to deepen our understanding of the gospel. That believers even speak of 'someone who lives a good life but doesn't believe in Jesus' reveals that we have not fully accepted God's teachings about sin. Both the Old Testament and the New are filled with warnings that "there is no one righteous, not even one". Jesus himself said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." Will we accept this, or will we insist on following the world's policy of comparisons and fleshly reasoning?

Admitting our complete lostness without Jesus is painful for only a moment, and then it brings a precious release from our constant self-justification and fleshly striving. Let Jesus bear the burden of our sin, for he has already paid the penalty for the sins of all those humble enough to confess their guilt.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2010*

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Week Five: The Firstborn Over All Creation (Colossians 1:15-18)

Although the Christians in Colosse were dealing with some very specific problems (in particular, some false teachings that Paul discusses later), at the root of it all was the same thing that is so often at the base of our troubles, no matter how different they may seem on the surface. They had allowed themselves to focus on human wisdom and human experts, and had forgotten to keep Jesus Christ crucified at the center of their lives, their thoughts, and their ministries.

When Jesus came to our earth, he represented the image of his Father, to the degree that an immortal and infinite God can be described in our lower, mortal world (1:15-16). He does not represent his Father's physical nature, which would only be possible in God's higher realm. Rather, Jesus illustrates through his life and ministry the spiritual qualities of God: God's absolute purity and deep compassion, his inability to tell the smallest untruth, his complete disregard for human fleshly values and idols. Through Jesus we can see these and many other qualities of God that run counter to human wisdom and logic.

Paul says all things in our universe were created both for Jesus and by Jesus (see also Hebrews 1:2). This is never fully explained, but we do not need to know the details. Since we have yet to grasp many of the more obvious aspects of the Savior's character, it would be idle speculation to form a systematic description of the role Jesus played in Creation. It suffices to note that this is yet another dimension of Jesus that reminds us of his importance in all aspects of our existence.

Thus the apostle continues to emphasize the centrality of Jesus (1:17-18), reminding us that everything of significance comes from him. Later, Paul will refer to "Christ, who is your life" (3:4), and this idea runs throughout the epistle. Jesus is all of life that matters. Even in the church, we too often put the focus on self: our ministry, our service, our personal growth, and so on. We debate whether we have to do this or that; we debate whether we are allowed to do this or that. A true, humble focus will render such things unnecessary.

It is not easy to do this, for it involves the realization that our personal preferences and personal characteristics are no more significant to God than anyone else's are. But if we are humble enough to accept this, then we can see Jesus for everything he truly is. We must try not to 'believe' in a Jesus who is simply the embodiment of our own personal or cultural values. He did not come in order to adapt himself to any human culture; instead he calls us all to rise above the pretense, superficiality, and superstition that permeate every human society and culture.

We all have things in this world that we consider special. Because of this, we tend to interpret the Word of God through the filter of our own culture and upbringing. But the gospel is fair to all, for we must all learn to put Jesus first in our hearts, to allow him alone to be unquestionably good, and to make everything else in our lives conform to him, not the other way around.

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Week Six: Reconciliation For All (Colossians 1:19-23)

Though Paul has yet to make any direct comments about the false teachings that are circulating in Colosse, he is already providing the antidote to them. Jesus is all in all, and only in Jesus can we discern the true significance of our lives or of anything in our world. Jesus and the gospel are also universal; the same gospel is the gospel for everyone, in any place, at any time.

Jesus did not come to earth simply to be observed or even praised, but to reconcile a lost world to the Godhead (1:19-20). God's fullness dwelt in Jesus for this purpose. To orient Christianity around numerical growth, competition, 'celebration', self-expression, or the like, gravely misses the point. The ministry of reconciliation is necessary because of the destructive power of sin.

Whenever the gospel is preached, sin must be preached. Jesus did not come to make us happier or healthier. He did not come because the world needed better leadership, or because we needed more effective ways of serving God. He did not come to 'straighten out' the secular government. He came because his Father desires to live among those whom he created, but their own sin prevents it. Jesus came above all to shed his blood on the cross. This is essential to the gospel.

Another essential feature of the gospel is its universality - as soon as it was proclaimed, it made God's grace available through Jesus to everyone, everywhere, and in every time to come (1:21-23). "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) Every human being old enough to know right from wrong has sinned, and thus has become alienated from God. Once we have done this, Jesus' blood is then the only way to be reconciled with God.

It is Jesus, not our church, who is universal. We sometimes think that it is "impossible" for someone in a radical Muslim society, or someone in a remote, desolate corner of the earth, to become a Christian; thus we may think that God will have to use some other 'standard' to judge such persons. Such misconceptions may be sincere, yet they are still incorrect. It may well be impossible for a 'Church of Christ' to be established in such places - but that is not the same thing. It is possible for a seeker of God to meet Jesus through the church, or without the church's help, or even in spite of the church. Is our faith in God, or is it in the church and its activities?

Note that verse 23 does not say that in Paul's lifetime the gospel had already been proclaimed by humans in every part of the (then) known world. This is historically wrong (it took several centuries for this to happen); it is also a misinterpretation that reveals how easily we put our faith in human activity instead of in God. The gospel was proclaimed to 'every creature under heaven' (which, taken literally, includes animals) by God, not by humans. This happened at the cross. Since then, God has never refrained from seeking those whose hearts seek him - and he always has ways to bring the teachings of Jesus to such persons, wherever they are. Is our faith in God's grace and truth, or is it in human evangelism and in misguided human concepts of 'justice'?

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Week Seven: The Mystery Of Christ In Us (Colossians 1:24-29)

Paul has emphasized to the Colossians that Jesus is all in all; only in Jesus can we discern the true significance of our lives or of anything in our world. Jesus and the gospel are also universal; the same gospel is the gospel for everyone, in any place, at any time. Grasping this central truth is necessary if we wish to understand what Paul now refers to as a 'mystery'.

The mystery that is revealed in Jesus is not a secret or a piece of information; it is Jesus himself, God's own begotten Son made a blood sacrifice to reconcile humanity to God (1:24-27). For centuries on end, even the most faithful humans had to look to the future Messiah for the complete forgiveness that could come only through the Savior's blood. But no longer! Paul deliberately uses the term 'mystery' because of the popularity of 'mystery religions' that taught their followers to become worthy of spiritual secrets withheld from the less 'spiritual'. The gospel is not like this. It remains a 'mystery' in a different sense.

The true story of Jesus is not told in holiday television specials; it is not always proclaimed in churches, either. The full story of Jesus must mention the blood he spilled and the pain he felt. Only by seeing these clearly can we realize what sin does to the human soul. Only by seeing this clearly can we see the punishment that would have been ours if Jesus had not died on a cross.

This is why Paul accepts the call to be a selfless - and often suffering - servant of Jesus. We, too, can never understand the true meaning of ministry until and unless we first see our sin and Jesus' blood more clearly. Many of the worst features of today's churches - the superficial teachings, the fleshly emphasis on results, the craving for excitement - would not plague us so much if we would first take the time to understand the cross and its necessity.

In the epistle, Paul repeatedly emphasizes fullness, or 'perfection', in Christ (1:28-29). This is not ethical or behavioral perfection, but completeness, the awareness that in Jesus we have found all that we need. When we grasp this, we can see how unnecessary it is to resort to silly slogans, guilt motivation, trendy methodologies, or other such inferior devices in our ministries.

This also accounts for some of the biggest differences between the church in the New Testament and the church of our own time and place. The New Testament church did not rely on personalities or methods. They turned away from even the most popular aspects of secular society. They rejected its cultural values whether they were Roman, Greek, or even Jewish.

They did not withdraw from society, nor did they seek to control events of earthly significance. They simply ignored governments, celebrities, fads, scandals, and the like. They did not seek to coax others into their church; they did not try to 'sell' the church, and they did not apologize for the gospel. They instead sought out those who sought God (not those who were merely shopping for a church), and then told them the truths of the gospel. Who knows what might happen if we would do the same thing?

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Week Eight: The Treasures Of Wisdom & Knowledge (Colossians 2:1-5)

The gospel is glorious, but it is humbling. The gospel speaks of grace and salvation, but also of blood and sin. In Christ are truly the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; but there is a cost to these. We cannot obtain this treasure by money, by knowledge, or by good works, but only by humility. This paradox lies at the heart of the gospel. The world constantly tells us that certain persons merit and deserve wealth, privilege, or authority. But the gospel's true blessings are given only to those who know that they can never earn or deserve them.

Several times, Paul mentions the struggles he has endured for the sake of the gospel (2:1-3). Yet this is not to claim any merit or status for himself; nor is it to demonstrate his commitment to results or to some 'movement'. It is, rather, to emphasize the nature of any ministry that is true to the gospel. God's grace was purchased, and our souls were redeemed, only by the blood sacrifice of Jesus. Ministry in his Name, then, will inherently involve sacrifice.

This is hard for many Christians to understand, much less accept. Too often, believers want to think that, since Jesus made the sacrifice for our sin, we then won't have to make any painful sacrifices ourselves. On the other hand, authoritarian Christians may believe that they are qualified to decide what sacrifices others must make, and they may try to impose their decisions on less aggressive believers. Both attitudes show a disregard for the perspectives of the gospel.

Anything we love requires sacrifice. But most such sacrifices are made willingly, because of the value we place on the things we love. So too, sacrifice in Christ must be voluntary, not required, in order to mean anything. As a church, we should stop trying to find a magic shortcut or an emotional surge that will change everything. We should focus on an understanding of Jesus, on his sacrifice, and on his call to us.

Whether in the first century AD, our own era, or two thousand years from now, there will always be philosophers, teachers, leaders, experts, and authorities who give us convincing and 'fine-sounding' arguments for doing things their way (2:4-5). We must always resist the temptation to allow them to think for us. This is not merely a matter of practical wisdom - for it is essential to the gospel that each person must make an individual decision whether to follow Jesus.

God has never seen us as members of a particular church, a particular nation, or a particular culture. It is irrelevant to ask "what does the church teach about . . ."; and it is equally irrelevant to debate whether our nation or some other land is a 'Christian nation', for there is no such thing. No one can ever make for you (or for anyone else) the decisions that matter to God. We must each seek Jesus of our own accord; and we each must learn the truths of the gospel in terms that make sense to us. To hear that some expert has 'studied something out' should mean little to us one way or another. God wants you to know him and his truth for yourself.

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Week Nine: Rooted & Built Up In Him (Colossians 2:6-8)

In the epistle to the Colossians, as in many other writings of the New Testament, we are urged to look beyond the events of this earth, no matter how important they may outwardly seem, and focus on things of eternal worth. This is difficult for everyone; for we each came to know this world first before we came to know the gospel. As a result, we must constantly remind ourselves that the perspectives of this earth must always be distrusted, and that God alone can be trusted.

Instead of growing our roots in a church, in a nation, in a culture, or in an expert, we must learn only to be "rooted and built up in him" (2:6-7). It is at this point that Paul begins directly to discuss the particular problems that were disrupting the Colossian church. The believers there were beset by some outwardly impressive and persuasive teachers, who were combining a superficial form of Christianity with human logic that appealed to the universal fleshly desire for superiority and self-assurance.

Many theories have been debated about the details of these false teachings, with no conclusion ever being found. Commentators will often speak of 'the Colossian heresy' to refer to these teachings, as a way of acknowledging that no one is certain about all of the details. We do not, in fact, need to know all the details, just as today it is usually fruitless to debate the details about the various bizarre ideas that find popular acceptance in our own time and place. It is more important to allow the eternal, spiritual values of the gospel to dominate our thinking.

Many false and spiritually destructive ideas seem appealing even to believers (2:8). The real problem with most false teachings is not that they violate some particular verse of Scripture - indeed, some very destructive false teachings have been based on a Scripture passage taken out of context. The real problem with false teachings is that they promote fleshly human goals instead of the perspectives of Jesus. Even when the details of a theory or belief are arcane or obscure, it is usually not so hard to determine whether it fits in with the truth of the gospel.

Instead of piling up proof-texts to combat someone else's pile of proof-texts, we should instead ask whether an idea is based on the 'basic principles of this world' (numerical results, human authority, forensic logic, self-interest, earthly success, and the like) or on the principles and example of Jesus (forgiveness, humility, purity, sacrifice, and other fruits of the Spirit). If a method or doctrine is based on the former things, then it must be rejected no matter how appealing it seems.

As Paul continues to address some of the problems in Colosse, we can learn from the way he approaches them. Rather than arguing with human logic, he appeals to the principles of the gospel. For the primary goal of worship and ministry is not outward results, but the growing awareness and appreciation of the presence of Christ, his Father, and his Spirit among us.

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Week Ten: Nailed To The Cross (Colossians 2:9-15)

In writing to the Colossians, Paul has to contend with a difficult situation. His readers are faithful believers in Jesus, but they have been drawn dangerously off-course by some tempting teachings that seemed to offer them the chance to feel especially 'spiritual'. So too today, as in any era, there are many who adapt the gospel to serve human agendas, creating hypothetical versions of Jesus that cater to fleshly cravings for adventure, importance, or pleasure. In both cases, those influenced by erroneous teachings are likely to view others as spiritually inferior.

The fullness of Christ, and the fullness of God living in him, make it shameful when humans use Jesus as a mere justification for their own agendas and desires (2:9-10). The cross is properly not a symbol of religiosity or goodness, but a symbol of sacrifice and selflessness. Those who met Jesus in his own lifetime either saw the fullness of God in him, and bowed in humble awe before him, or else they saw the fullness of God and hated it because of their fear and pride. If we preach the Jesus of Scripture, then our hearers too will not be indifferent.

In responding to the gospel, we become intimately connected with Jesus' own actions (2:11-12). A believer who is baptized into Jesus shares in Jesus' death. The apostle also refers back to the Old Covenant rite of circumcision, seeing in it a pale shadow of baptism. Circumcision was usually involuntary; baptism is a voluntary choice made by a believer. Circumcision merely removed a small piece of superfluous flesh; in baptism a penitent believer has the full weight of guilt for his or her sin removed. Circumcision merely allowed a man to be part of a physical, temporary nation; baptism brings both men and women into an eternal spiritual realm.

The enormous changes brought about by the cross can barely be grasped by our mortal brains (2:13-15). In particular, note Paul's constant emphasis on the removal of guilt for sin. We can only appreciate what a blessing this is if we have first admitted the horrible danger into which our sins had placed us. Many would-be believers pull back from this teaching of Scripture; for none of us wants to see our own sins as being equally evil with the sins of others.

But your sins and my sins deserve eternal condemnation just as much as the sins of the world's most notorious villains deserve it. Those who can accept this grim truth will find the greatest joy in simply knowing and serving Jesus, regardless of the results. But those whose pride prevents them from accepting this will find themselves constantly needing to resort to artificial means of motivation; they become restless for outward results, excitement, and the like.

Paul also rejoices in the cross's refutation of earthly leaders and rulers. The cross does not defeat them on their own terms; we should not look to God to straighten out all of the folly and corruption of this world's authorities. It is a foolish waste of time for Christians to dream of earthly governments that would enforce Christian morality and make our ministries easy. Rather, the cross reveals the inherent emptiness and futility of this world's nations and powers. Faith in the cross has value for eternity, and it allows us to laugh at this world's foolishness.

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Week Eleven: Since You Died With Christ (Colossians 2:16-23)

In writing to the Colossians, who have been bothered and confused by false teachers and controversies, the apostle Paul has emphasized the power of the cross over the power of human institutions. He has urged them to value God's truth, not the false wisdom of worldly experts. He has contrasted the effectiveness of grace with the futility of law. To all of these sentiments, both his original readers and most present-day Christians would surely say 'Amen'. Yet, as Paul now details, we must also accept the ways these things should affect our lives.

The truth of the gospel calls us not to judge one another on superficial, external matters (2:16-17). We should refrain from judging others in this way, and we ought also to resist the impulse to worry about how others judge us. Paul's examples make it clear that this applies to questions about style, methods, or personal preferences, not matters of important spiritual principles.

The distinction between shadow and reality is an important link between the spiritual concepts and their applications. The outward forms of ministry under the Law of Moses were merely shadows, never intended to be permanent. But the death of Jesus, into which we were baptized, calls us to a higher order of ministry. The fullness of the cross allows us to focus on things that really matter - and the solemnity of the cross demands that we do so. Only the desire for false security leads us to fixate on worldly disputes, outward forms, and numerical results.

The apostle further warns us against going the way of those who compare their spiritual attainments with those of others (2:18-19). We are all familiar with 'believers' who rely on results or knowledge or ritual to claim some superior spiritual status, or to make us feel inferior. Paul warns us that such behavior does not and cannot come from someone close to Jesus. His somber caution should convince us of how important it is for us never to feel spiritually superior to anyone else; and it should remind us that no one else is ever spiritually superior to us, either.

A further implication is the ultimate uselessness of outward rules (2:20-23). Whether they are used as tests of fellowship, motivational tools, or any other purpose, outward regulations have no spiritual power. They may well help us to obtain short-term results that we desire, but this by no means makes them good. For even in this case they breed dependence on artificial forms of ministry, instead of helping us to grasp the fullness of Jesus and of the cross.

Our human nature will always seek outward rules, activity, and measuring sticks. Having these desires does not necessarily reflect on us negatively, for it often just means that we wish the church to be as strong as possible. Yet it is important that we move past such limited thinking, and accept the struggle that comes with trying to understand deeper spiritual truths. God calls us to struggle with these things, for only in this way can we truly understand Jesus. It is not always easy, but then Jesus has already done the most difficult part for us on the cross.

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2010*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Week Twelve: Since You Have Been Raised With Christ (Colossians 3:1-10)

Because we as believers in Jesus have died with Christ, our relationship with God is no longer based on law or works. If a person defines his or her relationship with Jesus through numbers, performance, or achievements, then that person does not yet know Jesus at all. If a person cannot follow Jesus without being given rules, or without being told 'what to do', then that person also has no true relationship with Jesus at all. Because we have not only died with Christ, but have also been raised with him, there are better and more powerful ways to follow him.

Being raised with Christ means that we can, should, and must raise our perspective as well (3:1-4). Our focus and our priorities can and should rise above the things that the world fixates upon. The things that trouble them - their 'crises' and their 'controversies' - do not need to disturb us, and they should not disturb us; for we know that humans have deeper and more lasting spiritual needs that are far more urgent and far more important than anything dealt with on the "news".

We know that Christ is our life, and that a relationship with him brings us grace, assurance, hope, and responsibility that transcend the events and disputes of this world. Only those with faith in the eternal God can have this perspective; and even many who claim to have such faith never really try to put it into practice in the right way. No one can set your heart on things above for you - you have to decide to do that for yourself. It is your responsibility; it has always been your responsibility; and it will always be your responsibility. Those who try to sell you a method- or program-oriented substitute are exploiting you, not helping you.

The sinful thoughts and habits within us cannot be removed by rules, quotas, frantic activity, or authoritarian 'leadership', but only by the blood of Jesus (3:5-10). We have full knowledge of right and wrong, but this was really in our hearts already, even before we submitted to the truths of the gospel. There are fleshly methods and programs that can, for a time, control our outward behavior - but methods and rules cannot ever cleanse our hearts, neither of our sinful desires nor of the guilt for the times in the past when we have indulged them.

Genuine, inward change comes only from being renewed by the blood of Christ. Outward change can be accomplished by many means, and indeed - sad but true - many believers confuse mere fleshly excitement or numerical results or moral behavior with spiritual growth. The Word of God consistently calls us to be renewed inwardly, day-by-day and even moment-by-moment, so that God can live through us, bringing about whatever outward things he wills.

Living in such a way is much less likely to impress other humans, and it will call us to make true sacrifices, the kind for which we obtain neither results nor recognition. For this is the way that Jesus himself so often had to live. But this is the life that greatly pleases the great and gracious God who created us all.

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Week Thirteen: Christ Is All, & Is In All (Colossians 3:11-17)

Because we died with Christ, our relationship with God is no longer based on law or works. Because we have also been raised with him, there are better and more powerful ways to follow him. The gospel is not intended to bring about mere fleshly excitement, numerical results, or moral behavior, for there are already worldly methods that can accomplish such things without the blood sacrifice of the Son of God. The cross and the empty tomb call us to redefine our entire perspective on everything, even to redefining our own identity.

Worldly distinctions based on nationality, race, culture, personality, or status thus have no place at all amongst those who have chosen to follow Jesus (3:11). While we might willingly assent to this idea verbally, few Christians actually practice it. Too often, we so eagerly accept the world's indoctrination that we even think it is good to conceive of ourselves in terms of our fleshly loyalties. We prefer the false security of belonging to an earthly nation or party or group, instead of valuing the eternal purpose of being first, last, and only a believer in the living God.

We can easily use worldly logic to rationalize our fleshly allegiances, yet in the Scriptures we are told that they ought to be discarded. This is also what Jesus meant when he said, "if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" (Matthew 5:30). He does not want us to harm our bodies, but to cleanse our hearts. Those who truly believe the gospel of the cross cannot have anything genuinely in common with those who emphasize their worldly loyalties.

Thus it is all the more important to live in grace and harmony with one another (3:12-14). The world's arguments, fights, and wars all arise from their habit of competing with one another for the few meager prizes this world holds. This accounts both for individual rivalries and also for conflicts on a much larger scale. What we share in Christ enables us to rise above such things.

There are never enough worldly prizes, honors, or distinctions for those who desire them. Even in the church, we must constantly fight the false allure of trying to be 'a great church', of measuring or comparing ourselves with what others have done, of trying to impress others. The things that matter are equally available to all, without the need for competition. We can each live in God's presence, and we can each get all the grace from God that we need. There is no reason for us not to help one another patiently, as we all seek the things of real value.

It naturally follows, then, that in Jesus we can and should learn to seek, honor, and praise God together (3:15-17). Although Paul does not use the same words, he is talking about worshipping God together in spirit and in truth, as Jesus said in John 4:24. Truthful worship involves exalting God and God alone, not promoting our own attitudes, methods, or programs. Truthful worship involves the acknowledgment that every one of us is in the same desperate need of God's grace, so that none of us will ever feel superior or inferior to any other. God equally forgives all, equally loves all, and equally calls all to live in his truth.

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Week Fourteen: Whatever You Do (Colossians 3:18-4:1)

Because we died with Christ, we can and should put away self-centeredness and selfish ambition. Because we were raised with Christ, we can and should turn aside from the law so that we can live by grace and faith. Jesus' blood has the power to draw us together, so that we can rise above fleshly differences and distinctions, to worship God together in spirit and in truth. To help us do so, Paul now addresses our fear that grace and faith will lead to disorder and immoral license.

Far from leading to chaos, truly living by grace leads to mutual submission and appreciation (3:18-22 and 4:1). It is revealing that this very passage, which is intended to abolish any thoughts we might have of claiming authority or privilege, is so often scrutinized and debated by those who feel a fleshly need for rules and laws to throw in others' faces. Instead, everyone is given responsibility, and no one is given authority. For example, wives are told to be submissive to their husbands, but husbands are not granted 'authority' that they can claim over their wives.

Each of us, whatever position we may have in this life, has certain responsibilities for which we are answerable to God and God alone. If being answerable to God is not a serious matter to us, then no number of rules or laws will humble us. Nor is anyone else answerable to you or me, for none of us is qualified to judge or evaluate another soul. Each of us has to fulfill our own responsibilities, even when others are ignoring theirs. If you are a husband, you must love your wife whether she is submissive to you or not. If you have a position of leadership, you must pour out your life in sacrifice, whether it is appreciated or not.

All this is extremely difficult for fleshly beings like us to accept, much less to practice - indeed, all this is possible if and only if we adopt a truly Christ-centered perspective (3:23-24). After all, this is what Jesus did. No one understood him, no one had more than a superficial appreciation of what he was doing, and yet he laid down his very life and spilled his blood for us. He did this for sinners and rebels, not faithful saints. He did this knowing full well that only a small fraction of humanity would ever take the time to love him enough to follow in his steps. This is what it means to do everything as if we were working for the Lord, not for other humans.

As for those who do seek to use 'grace' for selfish advantage, the apostle has a warning (3:25). While we do not have the right to judge one another or to make demands on one another, God does have these rights, and he will use them. He has told us how to live and what to value. He allows us each to choose whether to listen to him or to listen to the world. Those who have chosen to walk with him shall live in his presence forever. But to those who value the world's wisdom more highly than God's, God will give them what they have asked for - an eternity of separation from their Creator.

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Week Fifteen: Proclaiming The Mystery (Colossians 4:2-6)

When we were baptized into Jesus, we died with him and we also were raised with him. His blood washes away our sin and guilt, allowing us to have a completely new perspective on ourselves, on others, and on God. Yet this should not be the end of our spiritual journey, for there is yet - and there will always be - a world full of persons who still live for sin and self, oblivious to the gospel of grace, or even living in scorn of it.

Scripture constantly exhorts to pray and gives examples of how to pray (4:2-4). Yet there are many believers who conceive of prayer only as a way of trying to get things that they desire. There are also believers who rarely pray when they are alone with God, seeing prayer only as a social practice. We cannot 'fix' this with methods or how-to programs alone.

Prayer cannot be taught, only encouraged. There is no perfect way to pray, but there are many good ways to pray. Praying together is good, but it is your prayers when you are alone with God - when no other human can possibly hear you, when no other human can be impressed by your eloquence, when no other human will scorn you for your humility - that show whether God is truly a reality to you. More than anything else, prayer is an acknowledgement and an awareness that God is near and is ready to listen at all times.

Likewise, our daily lives provide us with countless other opportunities to put our faith into practice (4:5). Do not be intimidated by Paul's exhortation to make use of 'every' opportunity, because no one (Paul included) could literally achieve this. What the apostle is saying is different - his wish is that we would see how completely even the most mundane moments can be influenced by the gospel.

Everything that happens to us, whether good, bad, or weird, provides an opportunity to see the things of this world for the fading mist that they really are. This in turn provides an opportunity for others to see that the real difference between a believer and an unbeliever is one of perspective, not merely one of outward behavior. The world's crises and controversies provide us with the opportunity to be more grateful for the eternal security we have in Jesus. This in turn provides an opportunity for others to see that they, too, can simply ignore the world's distorted perspectives and faulty values. There are many other such things that we can see once we accept the spiritual responsibility that God has given us.

Conversation provides a particularly easy and important chance to apply these ideas (4:6). A conversation full of grace and 'seasoned with salt' (that is, full of truth and wisdom) does not involve memorizing factoids or lining up proof texts. It does require a perspective based on the gospel, and values based on what Jesus called us to value. It calls us to question everything that the world tells us, and to accept everything that Jesus tells us. These are things that anyone can do, for God does not show favoritism, but allows each of us to know him as fully as we wish to.

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Week Sixteen: Everything That Is Happening (Colossians 4:7-18)

Paul has constantly reminded the Colossians of the overriding importance of the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection. The truth of the gospel is their best protection against false teachers; the power of the gospel is their best defense against temptations to sin; the wisdom of the gospel offers the best way for them to define their lives and identities. As the apostle closes his epistle, he calls them to let everything in their lives be influenced by the gospel.

This is true even in the routine exchanging of personal news with one another (4:7-9). The two believers who are delivering Paul's epistle (Tychicus is also mentioned in Acts 20:4, Ephesians 6:21, and Titus 3:12; and Onesimus was a former resident of Colosse whose personal situation is the subject of Paul's letter to Philemon) are both preparing to tell the Colossians what is happening with Paul, who is currently in prison.

Now, the Colossians already knew that Paul was in jail, and his messengers do not bring news of a sudden release or a miraculous escape. What they do bring is more important - they can remind the Colossians of Paul's spiritual condition. Although many personal freedoms and comforts are now denied to Paul, he rejoices in knowing that his sufferings are spiritual sacrifices for his faith, not worldly retribution for selfish crimes. Although Paul's opportunities to teach the gospel to the lost have also been severely curtailed, he rejoices in knowing that it is God's power and wisdom, not Paul's own, that will reach others.

The apostle also passes along greetings from those who are in personal contact with him, and who are praying for the Colossians even though they are physically separated from them (4:10-15 and 4:17). Notice how often the apostle tells other believers of the devotion and sacrifice that he has seen in others, even those unknown to his readers. He does not do this in a phony, press release manner, and he is not doing it so that the Colossians will feel pressured to 'do more'. His desire in sharing such things is more Christ-like.

Every faithful follower of Jesus is called to make sacrifices and to do things that are difficult or frightening. Sadly, believers have the tendency to exalt the few forms of ministry that are more visible or more given to numerical results, instead of appreciating the many ways even the least noticeable believers demonstrate faith. Paul is not asking for any of us to try to 'do something great' in order to be noticed - on the contrary, he is calling us to remember to treat all believers with the love and respect that come from knowing that they have probably gone through many things and made many sacrifices because of their faith, even if we have not seen them.

The epistle closes with a simple reminder of our inter-relationship and oneness in Jesus (4:16, 18). Not even Paul could tell every congregation or every individual everything of importance. And no believer has ever understood all of God's teachings and priorities. He asks them to exchange letters with the Laodicean church and to remember him personally because in Christ we all need each other - not to tell one another 'what to do', but to remind each other of what matters, and to assure one another that we shall stand together as long as we are on this earth.

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