

SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Sunday AM Adult Bible Class, Autumn 2013

Colossians was written to address some erroneous teachings about the gospel that had confused the believers in Colosse. But Paul shows that their specific problems merely represent some common struggles that we all have in understanding the real meaning of the gospel. As a result, the epistle can help all of us better to understand the basis of our relationship with God.

Tentative Outline & Schedule:

<u>Week</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Passage</u>
Week 1 - September 8	The Word Of Truth	Colossians 1:1-8
Week 2 - September 15	In Whom We Have Redemption	Colossians 1:9-14
Week 3 - September 22	The Firstborn Over All Creation	Colossians 1:15-20
Week 4 - September 29	The Mystery Of Christ In Us	Colossians 1:21-29
Week 5 - October 6	The Treasures Of Wisdom & Knowledge	Colossians 2:1-8
Week 6 - October 13	Nailed To The Cross	Colossians 2:9-15
Week 7 - October 20	Since You Died With Christ	Colossians 2:16-23
Week 8 - October 27	Since You Have Been Raised With Christ	Colossians 3:1-10
Week 9 - November 3	Christ Is All, & Is In All	Colossians 3:11-17
Week 10 - November 10	Whatever You Do	Colossians 3:18-4:1
Week 11 - November 17	Proclaiming The Mystery	Colossians 4:2-6
Week 12 - November 24	Everything That Is Happening	Colossians 4:7-18

The class on Colossians is the third in this year's series of classes connected by the concept of perspective. The book of Job, which we studied in Spring, teaches perspective on the troubling questions of life. Proverbs, which we studied over the Summer, provides spiritual perspective on daily living. Colossians, for its part, helps us to develop an eternal perspective.

Bibliography

The following books can also be used by those who wish to study the book of Colossians further on their own. You're welcome to see me if you'd like specific recommendations.

F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles To The Colossians, To Philemon, & To The Ephesians* (NICNT)
James Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians & to Philemon* (New Int. Greek Text Commentary)
P. Gorday, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Ancient Christian C.S.)
David Lipscomb, *Commentary On The Epistle To The Colossians* (Gospel Advocate)
R.C. Lucas, *The Message Of Colossians & Philemon* (Bible Speaks Today)
Curtis Vaughan & Frank Gaebelein (editor), *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, volume 11

These are two very good additional references to use for more in-depth of any of the New Testament books:

Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds Of Early Christianity*
Merrill Tenney, *New Testament Survey*

- Mark Garner, September 2013

SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

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

The epistle to the Colossians addresses some specific needs of its recipients, but the implications of its teachings extend far beyond the original context. The Christians at Colosse were faithful but confused, and were having difficulty distinguishing the genuine gospel of Jesus from human teachings and methods. Paul opens by reminding them of the eternal truths of the gospel.

The Epistle To The Colossians (Colossians 1:1-2)

Colossians is one of the letters that Paul wrote during his first imprisonment in Rome. Unable to travel, to visit other believers, or to proclaim the gospel in new territories, the apostle devoted a lot of time to written correspondence. Thus, because of the inconveniences he endured, we can benefit today from the lessons that he taught to believers many centuries in the past.

At the time he wrote Colossians, the apostle Paul was imprisoned, and thus quite limited in his ability to teach and minister as he undoubtedly wished to (1:1). Despite the great value of Paul's ministry, there were often times when God allowed him to be imprisoned for extended periods of time; yet God also relieved his frustration and anxiety by means of other faithful believers like Timothy, whom Paul mentions in his opening.

The apostle once said of Timothy that, "I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare" (Philippians 2:20). Timothy was a hard-working evangelist in his own right, yet his lasting legacy is one of sincere compassion for others - an example we see much more rarely.

Colossians is one of several letters that Paul wrote from prison in Rome*. As the end of Acts tells us (Acts 28:17-31), he was kept under house arrest but allowed some personal freedoms. Amongst his activities was writing epistles. Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon** were all written during this time, and Paul also wrote some other letters (including one to Laodicea - see Colossians 4:16) that are not part of the inspired New Testament.

* Paul was also imprisoned in other times and places, but his first imprisonment in Rome (approximately AD 61-63) is by far the most likely setting for the writing of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Later Paul was released, but a few years afterwards he was re-arrested and executed in Rome. Some commentators, determined to demonstrate their cleverness, have come up with alternative theories.

** Philemon was a member of the church in Colosse, and his slave Onesimus (who is the subject of the epistle to Philemon) is mentioned in Colossians 4:9. Commentators often speculate on Philemon's role in the Colossian church, but there is little known about him other than that he was wealthy and that he allowed the church to use his home as a meeting place (Philemon 1:2).

The Church in Colosse was not founded by Paul, and Paul had never been there* (1:2). Another believer, Epaphras (see verse 7 below), had initiated teaching the gospel there. This could well have been an indirect result of Paul's trip through the region on his third missionary journey, which began in Acts 18:23. The "road through the interior" (Acts 19:1) passed close to Colosse; and Paul's extended stay in Ephesus led to the gospel being taught throughout the region by those who heard him in Ephesus (Acts 19:10).

* Note that Paul's closing greetings to specific friends are most numerous in Romans and Colossians, two churches that he had never been to at the time he wrote to them. Note also Colossians 2:1.

A few centuries earlier, Colosse had been one of the largest and wealthiest cities in the province of Asia*, situated on what was then the main highway east out of Ephesus, and benefitting from the favorable agricultural conditions in the valley of the Lycus River. But by the time of Paul's letter, the city had long since shrunk and lost its importance, no longer on a main road and now overshadowed by the newer city of Laodicea, which enjoyed the favor of the Romans**.

* The Roman province of Asia refers strictly to a portion of what today is western Turkey. Several of its cities are mentioned in the New Testament. All of the cities in the Lycus River valley are known to have had large minority populations of Jews, which probably aided in starting churches there.

** The Romans had made Laodicea the administrative and financial hub of the region. Another nearby city, Hierapolis, had become a tourist center; and so it also by this time had overshadowed Colosse.

The spiritual problems in the Colossian Church of Christ are of more direct interest to us. In reading Paul's letter, it becomes evident that the Colossians have become influenced by speculative theology and obsessive rule-keeping, perhaps from a mixture of Gentile and Jewish influences. What commentators often label "The Colossian Heresy" can no longer be precisely identified, but we do know that this epistle was written in large part to urge the Colossian believers to return to a pure gospel of grace, forgiveness of sins, and the cross.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Should knowing that Paul is in prison influence the way we read Colossians? Might it have affected his approach in writing? Based on what we do know about the city and church, what might we expect to read about in the letter?

Prayers & Thankfulness (Colossians 1:3-4)

Paul greets the Colossian believers with a warm expression of thanksgiving. They are among many groups of disciples whose ongoing faithfulness and ministry bring hope and joy to the imprisoned apostle. Though Paul must soon address some problems that have arisen in Colosse, this in no way diminishes the encouragement that these brothers and sisters bring him.

Paul mentions right away that he has been praying for the believers in Colosse (1:3). For the apostle, prayer was not simply a mechanical routine or a duty, but an act of faith and compassion. Even when others have needs or struggles that we cannot meet directly, prayer is something that we can always do, and something that is always worthwhile. Paul's letters, in particular, offer numerous examples of prayers we can offer on one another's behalf.

Paul mentions faith and love throughout his letters (1:4). These are not mere abstract qualities, but blessings we share with one another. Frustrating as it was for Paul to be in prison, he found genuine encouragement from the faith and blessings God gave others. He clearly understood the real reasons for our blessings and the things we seem to accomplish in our ministries, never ascribing the credit to his own methods or zeal, but to God's grace and compassion.

The apostle also had a genuine concern for others, so that he could honestly say he was willing to "rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). It is one of the basic paradoxes of the gospel that we are called to die to our own selves (that is, to our self-will), yet also to respect and care about the needs of others as individuals, not as groups or masses. Many of the fine points in Paul's writings show us how to do this.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Look through Colossians (or another of Paul's letters), and note the references to prayer. What do they show us? Why is he thankful for the Colossians? What was Paul's concept of love? How did he put this into practice?

In All Its Truth (Colossians 1:5-6)

Everything of real value in Christianity depends on the truth of the gospel. Lasting faith and love can come only from an awareness of spiritual, eternal truths. And genuine spiritual growth comes only through the blood of the cross and the grace of the gospel. Once we can accept this, then we can live and minister without being so hindered by worldly preconceptions.

The apostle establishes a link between faith, love, and hope (1:5). He says that our faith and love come from our hope* in heaven, because God is the only true source of life, strength, and power. Paul knows that humans can generate a form of faith and a type of love without having any eternal hope - his point is that faith and love are powerless, and in some respects meaningless, unless our hope in God is sure and genuine, based on truth.

* The concept of πίστις ("pistis"), or faith, was sometimes personified as a female deity in Greek mythology, as was ελπίς ("elpis"), or hope. Paul, of course, views these as more personal qualities in our relationship with God. The word for 'love' in this verse is ἀγάπη ("agape"). Commentators sometimes overstate the difference between "agape" and the other Greek words commonly translated 'love'.

Living in hope is essential to the way of life to which Jesus has called us. It is, of course, entirely possible to do good things and to have good qualities without believing in heaven, but the awareness that our real home is in eternity makes a fundamental difference in everything else that someone believes. Conversely, the inability to focus on our spiritual, eternal identity is the reason why much of 'Christian' worship and ministry is worldly or even counter-productive.

Paul emphasizes specifically that it is the gospel*, not human wisdom or methodology or ritual, that gives life (1:6). It is the gospel itself that is "producing fruit and growing". The Colossians do not quite understand this, and thus have fallen into some spiritually hazardous habits.

* 'Gospel' (in Greek, εὐαγγέλιον, "euangelion") simply means 'good news'. The modern English word 'gospel' comes from the Old English word 'godspel' (pronounced with a long o), which means good report or good news. The Greek word "euangelion" was transliterated into Latin as 'evangelium', and from the Latin we get our words 'evangelism', 'evangelical', and the like. In their truest sense, they simply refer to the content of 'good news', not to the means of proclaiming it.

Paul praises the Colossians for understanding God's grace, though he will soon explain some important points to them. Paul clearly understood our complete reliance on grace for our salvation. "If by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Romans 11:6). Grace is, ironically, even more threatening to the flesh than authoritarian religion is. Though rules are a burden to the soul, they at least allow the flesh a chance to prove that it is superior to someone else's flesh. Only grace makes us all truly equal.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Paul say that faith and love come from hope? Can we tell what he means by these terms? What does he mean by the gospel? How does it compare with the way that we use words like 'gospel' and 'evangelism'? Why is grace so important to Paul? Is it important enough to us?

Looking Back & Looking Ahead (Colossians 1:7-8)

In reminding the Colossians that the gospel is producing life and growth all over the world, Paul is both encouraging them and also laying the groundwork for some important lessons to come. It also provides him some encouragement to think about this, for he knows that even when he himself cannot teach or serve in person, the gospel itself is powerful enough to work on its own.

Just before leading into his main points, the apostle encourages the Colossians to take a brief look back to their first acquaintance with the gospel (1:7-8). The faithful Epaphras, whom God used to teach the gospel to the Colossians, is one of many persons whose considerable efforts and sacrifices* for the gospel are barely mentioned even in the New Testament.

* In Philemon 1:23, Paul refers to Epaphras as, "my fellow prisoner for Christ Jesus", so he too may have been in prison at the time (see also Colossians 4:12-13). Otherwise, we know little about Epaphras. It is likely that Epaphras was a native of Colosse who heard Paul teach in Ephesus. It is sometimes supposed that he may also have helped start the churches in the nearby towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

It is human nature to focus on a few especially visible persons like Paul or Peter, but it is more in keeping with the gospel to see such persons as only a small sample of the many, many believers who were all equally faithful and who all equally pleased God with their willingness to teach a brand-new message to a world that was often hostile. It is part of growing as Christians that we give neither too much nor too little attention to any particular believer or leader, but that instead we see how important all of the parts of the body are - even those whose roles are less obvious.

Looking ahead to Paul's main message to the church in Colosse, a simplified outline of Colossians would look as follows:

Paul first describes the riches and blessings of the gospel (Colossians 1). While this is certainly encouraging for its own sake, he mentions these things to the Colossians for some specific reasons. The problems in Colosse (Colossians 2) have been caused by strong-willed teachers who have planted doubts in the Colossians' minds about the usefulness of the pure gospel of grace. Paul wants them to see the contrast between the lasting, spiritual rewards of the true gospel and the fleshly, competitive distinctions that come from human religion.

After developing these ideas, the apostle describes a resurrected perspective on life and ministry (Colossians 3). When we truly grasp the reality of the gospel of grace, it alters everything we do and think - without the necessity of motivational devices or human methods. The epistle closes with a discussion of personal responsibilities and personal news (Colossians 4). While in one sense this is the most 'practical' or down-to-earth part of the book, the New Testament does not really make a distinction between the spiritual and the practical. The gospel is simply the truth, and the New Testament teaches us to listen to it carefully and to live by it naturally.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why don't we know more about Epaphras? Are there others like him who are not mentioned at all in the Bible? What does this teach us? Why might Paul have reminded the Colossians of the first time they heard the gospel?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Two: In Whom We Have Redemption (Colossians 1:9-14)

Even for believers in Jesus, it is not easy to maintain a focus on Jesus and on God rather than on human activities and desires. Yet everything of genuine value in Christian ministry and worship depends on the awareness that through Jesus alone do we find redemption, forgiveness, salvation, and grace. Accepting this principle allows us fully to appreciate what God has done.

Review & Overview Of Colossians (Colossians 1:1-8)

Paul wrote Colossians during his first imprisonment in Rome. He had never been to Colosse, but had learned about the Colossian church from friends like Epaphras and Timothy. While much of the news from Colosse was encouraging, there were also some problems. These were in essence little different from some common problems today, so the apostle's advice is valuable for us, too.

The apostle opened with prayer and thanksgiving for the Colossian believers, and then reminded them that the gospel is the Word of truth (1:1-8). He wants them to realize that Christianity is really true, not merely a nice philosophy; the gospel of the cross and the forgiveness of sins is actually real, not merely one more human religion cluttering up the landscape.

Paul will first detail the spiritual blessings and eternal riches of the gospel (Colossians 1). This perspective provides important background for his discussion of the problems in Colosse (Colossians 2). The Colossian church has gotten bogged down in speculative theology and obsessive rule-keeping, and has lost sight of the pure gospel of the cross.

Then the apostle describes a resurrected perspective on life and ministry (Colossians 3). As so often, we see how important it is to "clean the inside of the dish" first, by re-examining our perspectives before trying to make outward changes. The letter concludes with a discussion of personal responsibilities and personal news (Colossians 4). Even though Paul had never met the Colossians, he always knew that each person was important for his or her own sake.

Prayers For The Colossians (Colossians 1:9-10)

Prayer is valuable in our relationships with one another, as well as important in our relationship with God. Paul's prayers for the Colossians combine both of these priorities, for we can see his care and concern for these believers when he prays that they might see and understand God more clearly. He knows that this will in turn help them with many other questions in their lives.

Paul's prayer reveals his particular hope that the Colossians will grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding (1:9). His phrasing is significant: he prays that they will "be filled*" rather than asking that they fill themselves; for he knows that real spiritual wisdom must come, like all other spiritual blessings, by grace. He does not pray for them to become scholars, but instead to be humble enough for God himself to fill them** with the insight they need.

* That is, the verb in the Greek text is a passive verb. The NIV translates the passage as, "asking God to fill you", but this is an inference - the original text simply says, "that you may be filled" (see NASB).

** There is also another point that becomes clear later in the letter - the false teachers who are troubling the Colossians have been telling them that there is a 'fuller' version of Christianity beyond the 'plain' gospel.

Most believers willingly pray for one another's medical needs, family problems, and the like. It pleases God when our compassion for others' sufferings and anxieties leads us to remember them in prayer; and it is also good for us to realize that God alone truly knows what is best and has the power to bring it about. Let us then add to these prayers a stronger awareness of the even greater spiritual needs of others, both unbelievers and believers, as these are also well worth praying for.

If we are sensitive to the bodily pains and fears of others, so that we urgently pray for them, should we not be just as concerned 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.

All this is part of pleasing the Lord in every way (1:10). Paul's wish for his readers to "live a life worthy of the Lord" is not a hope for them to gain accomplishments or experience victories - it is, rather, 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 highly valued by the worldly.

By gaining a more spiritual mind-set, exchanging our worldly and self-oriented priorities with more Christ-like thoughts, we automatically transform our words, thoughts, and actions*. This leads to us "bearing fruit in every good work" naturally, without resorting to artificial modes of motivation such as pep talks or guilt manipulation. Paul prays for the Colossians to gain spiritual wisdom and understanding because these are the basis of meaningful worship and ministry.

* The importance of this also becomes clear later in the letter - some outside teachers have been teaching the Colossians that in order to please God they must obtain a special kind of knowledge beyond the gospel itself, and then to follow certain rules that will make them superior to other believers.

The gospel produces life and natural growth whenever we believe in it and allow its truths to guide our minds and hearts. Contrary to the new teachings that have confused the Colossians, the basic truths of the cross and the resurrection contain more than enough power and grace to bring God's presence into the lives of all who believe in them. So Paul prays for all of his brothers and sisters to be filled, not with facts or methods, but with the grace, truth, hope, love, and faith of the gospel. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Paul pray for the Colossians to "be filled" rather than to fill themselves with wisdom? What kind of wisdom does he want them to learn? How does spiritual wisdom please God and lead to spiritual fruit? Why is it hard for many believers to focus on understanding instead of direct action?

The Kingdom Of Light (Colossians 1:11-12)

Our mortal nature makes it difficult to grasp the nature of our eternal inheritance. And indeed, it is impossible for us to devise a physical description of heaven or of eternity that would not be trivial or misleading. Paul instead provides a spiritual description of our eternal inheritance, and he also shows us how this connects with our lives in this world.

It is by God's power, not human self-will, that we develop the qualities that truly 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 may often deceive both ourselves and others - but which cannot please God, regardless of the excitement or results that it produces.

God appreciates endurance, patience, and joy; for they show our willingness to keep living as God calls us to, regardless of whether it brings us the worldly rewards that we desire. Patience and endurance require us to see and accept God as the source of genuine strength and power. He has unlimited strength to get us through our trials here and to help others to do the same. Understanding this brings true joy, not the cheap substitute of temporary 'happiness'.

Our true inheritance as believers has always been with God himself (1:12). His kingdom is a land of light, for nothing is hidden and nothing sinful is there. It is a realm of truth and grace - and because our salvation is above all by grace, it can never be deserved or earned. We are thus called to accept God's blessings, God's grace, and God's compassion with grateful humility and continual thanksgiving. We should not try to prove that we deserve spiritual blessings, but instead should remain grateful and humble before God.

In every era, there are persons like the ones who are troubling the Colossians: teaching methods, rules, speculations, and outward accomplishments that make some believers feel self-righteous and others feel guilty or anxious. This is why, as hard as it is for our mortal minds to see, we should continually remind one another that it is God himself who has "qualified*" us by simply forgiving our sins, so that we do not have to try to earn something we could never earn.

* NIV and NASB both use 'qualified', while NRSV uses 'enabled'. (The KJV uses the older expression 'made us meet'.) The word in the Greek text implies a (one-way) giving of strength.

"He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him" (Isaiah 59:16). Our inheritance is in keeping with the means by which God obtained it: it is the inheritance "of the saints", literally, "of the holy (ones)". To be holy allows us to be in God's presence, to belong to him alone, and to be a part of his eternal realm rather than this world.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is the difference between God's strength and ours? Is there a practical difference involved in which one we use? Will we be able to tell? In what ways does "light" characterize God's kingdom? How did God "qualify" us for it? Why is God's kingdom an "inheritance"?

The Kingdom Of The Son (Colossians 1:13-14)

We are heirs to an eternal kingdom, yet it is also by its nature very much a personal kingdom. All of the kingdom's blessings and all of the kingdom's characteristics descend from the Father and his Son, not from what humans put into it. This will be true in eternity, and thus we are called to live by the same focus and values as long as we remain here on this earth.

It is essential to our understanding of the gospel that we constantly remember that we have been rescued, delivered, redeemed, and saved - the specific words themselves are less important than the humility that the idea induces in us (1:13). To be rescued from "the dominion* of darkness" is no small thing. Believers must not delude themselves about the gravity of the danger from which Jesus' blood has rescued them. When Paul reminded both himself and others that as an unbeliever he was "the worst of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15-16), this was no false modesty.

* Literally, "the authority of darkness", that is, our inability to resist darkness, selfishness, and sin.

And we too, even if we are not violent or hateful, must learn to see our sins for what they are. Admitting our complete lostness without Jesus' blood is painful to our pride and our sense of earthly identity, yet 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 for the sins of all those who are humble enough to confess their guilt.

Sometimes it is easy to recognize the darkness for what it is, sometimes it is not. Even most believers spend much of their lives deliberately trying not to see the true depths of darkness and lostness around them - they may bemoan the outward sins, at least those that especially frighten or disgust them, but they do not look inside human hearts to see the despair, pain, and fear that produce all those outward sins. Only God's beloved Son can overcome all of these sins, both in us and in others, both the inward sins and the outward sins, to bring redemption and hope.

We must always remind ourselves that, for all the blessings and benefits that Jesus brings, the most essential is forgiveness of sins (1:14). This is our most crucial need: unforgiven sin is the one thing that can permanently separate us from God. The need is the same for all: "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). "Darkness covers the earth ... but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you" (Isaiah 60:2).

The concept of redemption* is important to grasp both for our own sake and for the sake of others. Jesus had to use his own blood to or redeem us, to buy us back, from the penalty due us for sin. "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10, Psalm 14:3); "No one is good except God alone" (Mark 10:18). Every person in every place in every time has an equal need for Jesus' blood and the redemption it provides. Jesus' kingdom is not a heroic assembly of righteous persons who have passed his test and proved themselves worthy - it is the kingdom of the redeemed, a humble family of those who realize that they could never be worthy.

* In the Greek text, it is ἀπολυτρωσις ("apolutrosis"), an act specifically involving the release or return of something by means of a payment. It was used of ransom payments, release from slavery, deliverance from captivity, and other similar situations.

The gospel of Jesus is about grace and more grace. Grace to ourselves, grace to others. Grace to believers, grace to unbelievers. Grace in ministry, grace in teaching, grace in action. It is what we all need; and even if the flesh disdains it, it is what our souls long for. Jesus' grace is personal; no one can accept it or reject it on our behalf. Each of us is called to set aside both worldly distractions and religious preconceptions, to accept Jesus' blood and grace and to make it the foundation of our resurrected lives.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is "the dominion of darkness"? Why does Paul use this term? Why is there no other way out of it except through Jesus? In what sense is God's kingdom "the kingdom of his Son"? What are the implications of this? Why is it appropriate to say that we have been "redeemed", or "repurchased"?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Three: The Firstborn Over All Creation (Colossians 1:15-20)

Though originally intended to help the Colossian church with some specific misunderstandings, this majestic passage about Jesus can provide any Christian with a great deal to ponder. Jesus' transcendent nature can only be hinted at with human language; and his ability to lift us out of all spiritual danger is far greater than we ever acknowledge or realize.

Review Of Colossians So Far (Colossians 1:1-14)

Paul has never been to Colosse, but he has learned about the church there and is concerned about some problems that have arisen. He has been praying for the Colossians to be filled with God's truth and wisdom; and now in his letter he will explain to them that the 'plain' gospel of Jesus needs no embellishment, for it is far more powerful than human-made theologies or rules.

The gospel of Jesus is the Word of truth (1:1-8). If the message of the cross and the resurrection is really true, then we do not need any special methods, theologies, or programs to give it additional importance or power.

It is Jesus himself in whom we have redemption (1:9-14). In Paul's prayers for the Colossians, he asks that above all they might receive spiritual understanding, so that they can develop a strong foundation for their faith. God has called us to his kingdom, but it is not the kind of kingdom we see on earth. It is a kingdom of light, in which all truth will be revealed; and it is the kingdom of Jesus, God's Son - that is, it is inherently personal rather than legal or political.

Jesus Is Above All Creation (Colossians 1:15-17)

The gospel contains eternal truth and life-giving power because it is based on Jesus, whose unique nature combines divinity and humanity in a way that resolves the basic spiritual dilemmas of our existence. One of the many implications of Jesus' nature is his pre-eminence over our physical universe. He showed this in many ways, not least in raising from the dead.

When Jesus lived in human form, he became an image of the invisible God in a world separated from God's presence by its sins (1:15). "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3); "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Human language cannot adequately describe this, nor can it describe the other concepts in this passage of Colossians*; and so we should allow these ideas to stretch our imaginations instead of forensically examining the words and phrases.

* It is generally thought that Colossians 1:15-20 comes directly from an early Christian hymn. It is not known whether Paul quotes the hymn directly or, perhaps more likely, adapts the wording in order to make the ideas especially appropriate for the Colossians' present spiritual needs.

As his Father's "firstborn", Jesus is also the "firstborn over all Creation". These ideas emphasize relationships rather than scientific or genealogical facts. Since phrases like 'firstborn' and the familiar 'only begotten Son' cannot possibly have the same literal meaning in referring to the

Godhead as they do in earthly matters, we should base our understanding of Father, Son and Spirit on spiritual ideas and relationships, not legal analysis or exacting vocabulary study*.

* Note that the Greek word used here for 'firstborn', like the word in John 3:16 translated "only begotten", is a straightforward word without a special or intricate meaning - it is understood that readers will have to adjust their idea of these terms to a more spiritual setting.

Here, the description of Jesus as the creation's "firstborn" emphasizes his pre-existence, the fact that he was with God before the world began (consider also John 1:12 and John 17:5). This gives him considerable pre-eminence over any earthly ruler, teacher, or philosopher.

Further, all things were created by him and for him (1:16). The precise nature of Jesus' involvement in the act of creation is again beyond our understanding, yet we are assured that he was part of it (see also John 1:3, 1:10; 1 Corinthians 8:6, and Hebrews 1:3). The fleshly mind craves legal or scientific details, but the spirit and soul instead take simple comfort in knowing that the nature of Jesus the Son has been woven into our Creation.

Since Jesus is over both the seen and the unseen, it is wise for us to abandon our efforts to reduce the gospel's truths to earthly formulas. "For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18); and what is seen is trivial compared with the unseen realities. This is why Paul prayed for believers to be able to see with "the eyes of your heart" (Ephesians 1:18), instead of attempting to force gospel truths into a framework of human logic and experience. The very nature of Jesus, as man and God, is meant to communicate new and profound truths.

Then, as the firstborn of Creation, Jesus holds everything together (1:17). His sustaining power and sustaining grace protect us from the worst possible consequences of our physical mortal weaknesses, and they also protect us (and even protect atheists and unbelievers) from the worst possible consequences of human sinfulness.

Even the most faithful and grateful believer can barely appreciate all the ways that Jesus, the Spirit, and the Father take care of us during the course of a single day. The human capacity for selfishness, folly, and destruction is almost unlimited. So, while it is always a legitimate question to ask why God does permit the world's known horrors to occur, it is also well worth pondering the even worse sufferings that he prevents in our lives and others' without us ever noticing. It is simply human nature that we complain about the first and ignore the second.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What aspects of God's nature are seen in Jesus? Which aspects of Jesus the man can teach us about God? How is it important that Jesus is a 'firstborn'? Should this affect our relationship with him? What kinds of unseen things can we learn to 'see'? In what sense(s) does Jesus hold things together?

Jesus Is The Head Of The Body (Colossians 1:18)

Jesus himself, not any human or group of humans, is the head of the church. He holds this position neither by an arbitrary decision nor by an act of self-will, but by his nature as the divine firstborn of the living God and also the human firstborn "from among the dead". His divinity allows him to know everything about us, and his humanity allows him to understand our needs.

Jesus' pre-eminence* is all-encompassing because he is an all-encompassing Savior (1:18). Jesus' identity and his nature both make him the true head of the church. The apostle further equates the church with Jesus' body, to emphasize the personal connection. Jesus' identity as God's Son in itself entitles him to this position, but his qualifications go far deeper than that. His willingness to endure all our mortal limitations, humbly accepting loneliness, rejection and suffering, all without committing a single sin, is an even stronger claim to headship.

* Literally, the end of verse 18 says that Jesus is to "be first" or to "have first place" in everything, as it is rendered in the NASB and NRSV.

Paul adds another twist, though, in calling Jesus "the firstborn from among the dead". This is entirely true, because of the resurrection, yet it is also a deliberate paradox - with a point. The unique truth of the resurrection, which defies some of our basic logical assumptions, calls attention to the powerful implications of the truth of the gospel. If the gospel is true, then it has more than enough power in itself to give us what we need without human supplements.

So it is simply fitting, in many ways, for Jesus to have the pre-eminence in everything. From God's point of view, he wants us to see how everything comes together in Jesus, the Son whom he loves - and the Son for whose sake he has forgiven our sins. From our point of view, Jesus is much more than a mere authority figure, even more than a rescuer. His special nature, as both human and divine, provides us with the perspective and landmark that we need in order to understand his Father and to understand humanity.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what sense(s) is Jesus meant to be 'first'? Does his being 'first' differ from our usual understanding of being 'first'? Are there other words in our language that could help us describe this? Does 'firstborn from among the dead' refer only to the resurrection, or to something else in addition?

All Fullness Is Found In Jesus (Colossians 1:19-20)

Paul addresses some of the specific spiritual needs in Colosse while still maintaining a clear focus on Jesus' majestic identity. The idea of fullness or completeness can be an elusive goal for believers, and this difficulty often results in aberrant teachings about Jesus. So the apostle emphasizes Jesus' ability to fill us with every spiritual blessing we could ever need.

God put his own fullness* into Jesus (1:19), and so Jesus reflects many aspects of his Father's nature and character. Jesus is "the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3), because all that mortal humans can know about God's character can be seen in Jesus. This is both an encouragement and a caution. God goes to great lengths to teach us all that our limited minds can grasp; yet not only do we desire to know more than we can understand - what is worse, we often ignore things God wants to tell us in order to indulge our idle fleshly curiosity instead.

* Literally, "all the fullness", as in NASB (or KJV, which has "all fullness"). The Greek word πληρωμα ("pleroma") combines the ideas of fullness and completeness. Note once again that the concept of 'fullness' will be significant when Paul addresses the problems that have been afflicting the congregation in Colosse. The word in the Greek text is another everyday word that the apostle uses in a spiritual setting that calls readers to imagine how it could apply in a new context.

Knowing God through Jesus is a fundamental aspect of any effort to understand Christianity. God has always desired for us to know him personally and to know him by grace, in preference

to any efforts to develop a system or method for demonstrating our spiritual worthiness. God showed from the Creation that he desired for his creations to live in his presence, and he shows in the cross that he himself is willing to remove the great obstacle of sin.

And so the cross of Jesus is able to produce a full, complete, permanent reconciliation with God (1:20). Reconciliation is the necessary and sufficient step to bring us (back) into God's presence; and so if the cross can accomplish a complete reconciliation, then the cross provides everything that we need without further enhancements.

Paul describes this reconciliation as being not merely with humanity but with the entire universe. Rather than implying any literal statement about God's personal relationship with inanimate objects, this is instead a rhetorical way of emphasizing the complete sufficiency of the cross, the completeness of the reconciliation obtained by means of Jesus' blood*.

* In a different context, Paul personified the creation as eagerly awaiting the fulfillment of God's plans - see Romans 8:19-21. In that passage, Paul is also not being literal - he is emphasizing the complete harmony that God desires for his entire creation, as well as the personal connection that God feels with his creation.

The peace of the cross is far more profound than any worldly peace. It is different both in its nature and in the way that it was brought about. Worldly peace is merely the absence of war or conflict, but peace with God is something positive: living in God's presence and in his light. And humans usually try to bring about peace by force - forcing an opponent into abandoning resistance either by physical force, legal force, economic force, or verbal force. But Jesus brought about peace by shedding his own blood, not by demanding sacrifices from others.

Here is one of the hallmarks of Christianity that differentiates it from human-made religions. Unlike man-made or imaginary gods, God the Father is not merely a passive judge of whether or not we measure up to his standards. He actively removes the obstacles to knowing him. And when we grasp this, it changes our relationship with him; and it also transforms the ways that we worship and serve him.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what sense did God put his 'fullness' into his Son? Are there any practical implications to this? What kind of reconciliation did Jesus bring about? In what sense is God reconciled with "all things"? What kind of peace does the cross bring? In what ways is this peace different from the world's kind of peace?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Four: The Mystery Of Christ In Us (Colossians 1:21-29)

Many key aspects of the gospel are "mysteries" in that they are difficult for the human mind fully to grasp. But the gospel is not the kind of mystery that we can 'solve' by deductive reasoning or empirical observation alone. And it is certainly not the kind of mystery that requires a qualified specialist to explain. We must begin instead by adjusting our perspective and expectations.

Previously In Colossians (Colossians 1:1-20)

Paul has made a gradual transition from his warm introductory remarks into a discussion of some important ideas that are particularly appropriate in addressing the present confusion in Colosse. Once we see that the gospel really is true, we can begin to appreciate our redemption in Jesus and to understand the fullness that comes from the gospel alone, without any added supplements.

The gospel of Jesus is the Word of truth (1:1-8), and it contains enough grace and power to meet our spiritual needs without any human-made additions. It is Jesus Christ personally, not a system of theology or methodology, in whom we have redemption (1:9-14). God's kingdom is not like an earthly domain. It is a kingdom of light - that is, truth and understanding - and it is a kingdom founded on his Son, which thus reflects Jesus' own nature.

Jesus' identity as the firstborn over all Creation helps us to understand what his gospel means to us (1:15-20). Jesus is above all and before all, both the seen and the unseen; thus to understand him we should use the 'eyes of the heart' to look beyond physical objects and appearances. Since all fullness is found in Jesus, we need never look beyond the gospel for complete reconciliation and redemption, or for a full measure of grace, hope, and wisdom. Instead of seeking to add human teachings and systems to the gospel, we ought to try to grasp the gospel more deeply.

Transformed By The Cross (Colossians 1:21-23)

Even faithful believers have difficulty appreciating the true change that comes over a believer whose sins are forgiven through Jesus' blood. We are so easily distracted by outward things that we rarely ponder the enormous blessing of grace and the considerable love that it took for Jesus to bestow it on us. Because the gospel is 'free of charge', we often do not realize its full value.

Paul gives a starkly bleak description of the way we were before Jesus' blood cleansed us (1:21). To understand our need for the cross requires a spiritual perspective. To be alienated from God is a far more fearful thing than any earthly peril would be; yet we rarely have this perspective. Even when believers doubt their own salvation, it is usually a case of being frustrated with their own shortcomings rather than of appreciating how important it is to remain close to God.

Likewise, the concept of being an enemy of God is a shocking idea - Paul mentions it not to promote guilt or fear, but to instill a deeper understanding of the peace we now have with God. Being God's enemy starts in the mind ("enemies in your mind"), with outward actions being the symptoms* of decisions we have made inwardly. "Nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him unclean ... what comes out of a man is what makes him unclean" (Mark 7:18-20).

* The original implies either that we were God's enemies and showed it by our actions (see the NIV footnote), or that we were God's enemies in our minds as well as in our actions (as in the NASB).

The dramatic transformation of Christian conversion changes this completely, allowing us all at once to be presented holy in his sight (1:22). There is no intermediate stage, because the blood of the cross is strong enough to cleanse us once for all, while at the same time making us holy by making Jesus, instead of the world, our Lord - we receive both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). So God does not need merely to tolerate us as we slowly make the outward changes he calls us to - we are at once ready to be 'presented*' to him directly.

* Paul uses a verb that was usually used in regards to official presentations in front of royalty or important officials, situations that set high standards for those being so presented.

The cross, the blood, and the gospel render us without blemish and free from any accusation in God's sight. When we try to 'do enough' or 'learn enough' to make ourselves worthy of God, we automatically fail; for this can lead only to pride or despair. From the moment we are baptized into Christ, we are completely cleansed, and can be as close to God as we wish to. God has always wanted to know each of his creations, and has never demanded that we make ourselves worthy - the only obstacle to knowing him is our sin, which can be washed away by the gospel.

So now all that remains - though it is quite a big 'all' - is for us to "continue in your faith" (1:23). This is a bit more than merely continuing to believe in Jesus - it means to believe in his sufficiency, to resist the temptation to add unnecessary things to the gospel. We can hold on to the full measure of God's hope as long as we remember that Jesus's sacrifice on the cross was all-sufficient, instead of being tempted by 'fuller' versions of the gospel, as many in Colosse were*.

* Note, though, the vast difference in tone between Colossians and Galatians. In Galatians Paul said things like, "you who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:4). The difference is that the Galatians were teaching that circumcision (and other legal requirements) were necessary for salvation, while the Colossians merely thought that added human rules made them "fuller" (*i.e.* better) Christians. Both are problems, but the problem in Galatia was even worse.

The gospel is the same for everyone - when the apostle says that "this is the gospel ... that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven", he means that it is the same gospel for every (human) creature. Geographically, the gospel had then only spread to a limited area*, but it had already been proclaimed to the whole universe at the cross. We should not be surprised if the pure gospel does not excite or stimulate the flesh. Everyone's flesh has different desires, which accounts for all the distorted 'gospels' we encounter. But every soul has the same crucial needs.

* The gospel had not yet come close even to reaching all of the Roman Empire, much less the known world, much less the whole world. Much of Roman territory was not reached until the third century AD.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is it important to remember that we were once 'lost'? Can we understand what this means without becoming stuck in guilt or fear? Why is it hard for us to accept the fullness of God's grace? How do we "continue in your faith"? Why is it important to see that the gospel is the same for everyone?

The Mystery Revealed (Colossians 1:24-26)

Whatever is part of the gospel, whatever it truly means, however it is meant to affect us, these things have all been revealed by God himself. The truths of the gospel are the same for all, and our ministry can only have meaning if we keep this in mind. As individuals, we will spend a lifetime coming to appreciate the truths of the gospel; but God has already revealed the 'mystery'.

Suddenly becoming quite personal, Paul expresses how strongly he is motivated to do things "for the sake of his (Jesus') body", the church (1:24). Our redemption* came as a result of Jesus' afflictions - "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted" (Isaiah 53:4) - and so Paul hopes, in some much smaller yet sincere manner, to turn his own trials into something that will bless others.

* See the notes on Colossians 1:14 for a discussion of the word translated 'redemption'.

Redemption through affliction is a common idea in other religions and philosophies - but not at all in the same way. Many humans aim to redeem themselves or to make themselves worthy of God by accepting deprivation or mistreatment, but the gospel tells us that this cannot work. We cannot be a sacrifice for ourselves - but we can sacrifice for others' sake, as Jesus did for us.

Paul is a servant with a message - but he takes care to emphasize whose servant he is and where his message came from (1:25). Once more we see the word "fullness*" in reference to the Word of God, the gospel. When the Colossians heard the gospel of Christ proclaimed by Epaphras, it was simple, yet true and powerful. The message of the more persuasive teachers who came later, with their alleged secrets and special methods, was flashier but empty and unnecessary.

* See the notes on Colossians 1:19 for a discussion of the word translated 'fullness'. Note also the use of the idea of "filling up" in verse 24.

The gospel was many centuries in preparation, and though often foreseen, only in Paul's own lifetime was the whole truth finally disclosed (1:26). The gospel is a "mystery" not because it was obscure, cryptic, or clandestine, but because it was kept hidden for ages until the coming of Christ. The mystery* was then completely revealed, not to a select few but to all who listen.

* Literally, the word μυστηριον ("musterion") means a secret that could only be known by disclosure, not by logic or investigation. In practice, though, it was often used in the same ways we use the word 'secret'.

There is, indeed, a different kind of 'mystery' involved, in that the gospel's grace and truth stand contrary to all human perspective - and this is exactly why no one, even the great prophets, could foresee exactly the blessings God would bring through the gospel. "They only saw them and welcomed them from a distance" (Hebrews 11:13); "God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:40).

The gospel could come only by divine revelation and action, because no human wisdom would have conceived the sacrifice of God's perfect Son and the offering of forgiveness completely by grace. Human theological and philosophical systems only devise ways by which we can attempt to prove ourselves worthy of redemption, which to the living God is a contradiction in terms.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why was it necessary for Jesus to bring redemption through suffering? Why was it appropriate? How does the gospel compare with sacrifices in other religions? What does Paul mean by the "fullness" of God's Word? In what sense(s) is the gospel a 'mystery'? Is it at all like a 'mystery' in an everyday sense?

Mystery, Hope, & Glory (Colossians 1:27-29)

The nature of the gospel itself is contrary to our fleshly ways of thinking, and thus we often struggle to grasp the kind of hope that comes from the gospel. Likewise, our concepts of God's glory and of the glory we shall share with him are heavily influenced by the world's perspectives. Yet simply seeing this dilemma for what it is can enable us to see things much more clearly.

The apostle identifies the idea of Jesus being "in you" as the center of the "mystery" about the gospel (1:27). The concepts of God's Son being in some sense "in* us", with his Spirit being "in our hearts", while we likewise are "in God" and "in Christ", are profound ideas that cannot be understood by our usual human methods of reasoning. Paul calls this a 'rich' mystery (or one filled with 'riches'); for we can only grasp these ideas a little at a time. Yet if all we understand is that Jesus does truly live in us and we truly live in him, this is more valuable than all the theologians' efforts to formulate doctrines or creeds about the Godhead and its mysteries.

* Consider verses such as John 15:4, John 17:22-23, 1 John 2:24-27, 1 John 3:24, and 1 John 4:16 (note the contexts of each one, and think about other similar verses). In all cases the concept of "in" is too sublime to allow for a description in purely human language - which is part of what makes it a 'mystery'.

We also cannot fully grasp what God himself considers true glory, yet we can know that we have a hope of glory through Jesus. Hope is essential in our relationship with God - one of the 'three that remain' in 1 Corinthians 13:13 - so we will do well to nurture it just as we nurture faith and love. Once more, our hope in Christ is something of a mystery to the human mind, and one that again we cannot solve in the way we would like. Yet this should not put us off from trying to appreciate that the hope God offers is much stronger than any hope we can find in this world.

It is with all this in mind that Paul goes about proclaiming Jesus (1:28). The apostle never proclaimed a program, a method, a doctrine, or even a church: he proclaimed "nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2); for in Jesus everything else of importance is centered and founded. So the goal is not to build a perfect theology or a perfect church, but instead to "present everyone perfect in Christ*", that is, to allow each of us to stand in God's presence based only on the gospel of Jesus, not through human works, morality, or knowledge.

* Literally, 'to cause each person to stand mature (or complete) in Christ'. For more on the verb translated 'to present', see the notes on verse 22 above.

So when we look for Jesus' power at work, we should keep these principles in mind (1:29). Neither the means in which Jesus uses his power nor the goals for which he uses it will necessarily be what even believers expect. The apostle talks about making every effort, which is a familiar slogan in the church today - but he does not mean it in the same way.

Paul emphasizes that he uses Jesus' energy, not his own: he does not determine his own goals and then calculate how to attain them, but simply strives at all times to share with others the grace, compassion, and truth that Jesus had given him. This is at once harder and easier - harder because we often have to set aside the things we desire to achieve in order to allow God be in control, but easier in that we no longer have to compare ourselves with others or force ourselves to do things that we do not understand.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Can we define in words what "Christ in us" means? Can we understand in our hearts what it means? What is the difference between God's idea of glory and human ideas of glory? What does it mean to be "perfect in Christ"? What is the difference between using our energy and letting Jesus' energy work in us?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Five: The Treasures Of Wisdom & Knowledge (Colossians 2:1-8)

Throughout the book of Colossians, the apostle Paul draws a sharp contrast between the gospel's infinite reservoir of spiritual wisdom versus the empty promises of human theologies and philosophies. It is worthwhile to grasp each side of his comparison, so that we both fully accept the gospel and also resist the temptation to add our own conditions or supplements to it.

Recently In Colossians (Colossians 1:15-29)

If the gospel is true, then we receive redemption in Jesus and a full relationship with God from the gospel alone, with no need for any human-made supplements. Jesus is above everything, knows everything about us, and meets every spiritual need in full measure. This does not mean that the gospel is always easy to grasp - indeed, it is a mystery filled with "glorious riches".

Jesus, the firstborn over all Creation, embodies the gospel (1:15-20). Since Jesus is above both the seen and the unseen, to understand him we should use the 'eyes of the heart' to look beyond outward things. And all fullness is found in Jesus: complete reconciliation, complete redemption, a full measure of grace, lasting hope, and abundant wisdom. God calls us to grasp the gospel more fully and deeply rather than adding human teachings and methods to the gospel.

Paul speaks of the gospel as incorporating the "mystery" of Christ in us, to remind us that we can never understand it through human logic and investigation alone (1:21-29). We have been transformed completely by the cross, and need no further qualifications to be fully saved and fully in Jesus. The truths of the gospel are also the same for all; and though we will spend a lifetime coming to appreciate the truths of the gospel, God has already revealed the "mystery".

Across The Gap (Colossians 2:1-3)

There is an interesting parallel between the Colossians' relations with Paul and their relationship with God. The apostle wants them to realize his sincere concern for them; but is unable to be with them in person, and most of them have never met him. Then also, like all of us today, the Colossians are trying to get to know a God and a Savior whom they have never personally seen.

Paul initiated a long-distance relationship with the Colossians* to help them remain faithful to the gospel (2:1). There are inherent difficulties in pursuing a meaningful relationship with someone whom we've never met, and here there are added problems from the disruptive teachers who have, amongst other things, discredited Paul's credentials as a teacher of the 'full' gospel**.

* He has done the same thing with the Christians in Laodicea, as he mentions in this verse. He does know a few persons in Colosse, as we learn from chapter 4 and from the letter to Philemon.

** Paul's reputation was often undermined, even by Christians, for his devotion to the full grace of the gospel and his generous treatment of others (see also Romans 3:8, 2 Cor. 10:10, 11:4-12, 2 Peter 3:16-17).

There is a significant parallel in the way that any Christian must try to know a God who cannot be sensed physically, and about whom we all hear so many different things. The only way to

decide what is true about God is to understand his nature and character, which in turn we learn through the gospel. When something we read or hear about God is in harmony with the grace and truth of the gospel, it could well be true. But when a teaching contradicts the grace of the cross, then it cannot be true, no matter what kind of results, excitement, or satisfaction it brings.

The apostle again expresses his desire for the Colossians to know the mystery of God (2:2-3). He continues to use the term 'mystery' because the rival teachers have distracted the Colossians by claiming to possess certain valuable secrets (or mysteries*) revealed only to those who use special methods and study special teachings not available to 'plain' Christians.

* For this reason, some pagan religions of the era are collectively referred to as the "mystery religions". They emphasized secret teachings available only through special teachers and rituals. The false teachers in Colosse probably combined elements of one or more of these "mystery religions" with the gospel.

Their methods and teachings have encouraged believers to compete with one another instead of supporting and encouraging each other - hence Paul's emphasis on them being encouraged and united. "Whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40); and "When they measure themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise" (2 Corinthians 10:12). Often this contrast can also help us to distinguish between true and false teachings.

Paul knew that the Colossians truly desired to know the "full riches of complete understanding". So he does not criticize this desire, but instead re-directs it. True wisdom and understanding are found in Christ, not in competition with other believers to show who is the most spiritual or the "fullest". So by all means they should seek to know "the mystery of God" - namely, Christ.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What parallels and differences are there between a relationship with God and relationships with other persons? What can we learn from each? What kinds of religious 'secrets' or 'mysteries' are interesting but unimportant? How can we tell what 'mysteries' not to pursue? How does the true gospel build unity?

Growing Roots & Building Up (Colossians 2:4-7)

It is natural, as human beings and especially in our relationship with God, for us both to grow and to desire to grow. Yet just as many worldly persons seek the kind of 'progress' and 'growth' that only enriches or glorifies self at the expense of others, so also even in Jesus it is easy for us to go astray and to seek outward results at the expense of making more important changes inside.

Paul's caution against fine-sounding (NASB, 'persuasive') arguments is relevant in any era (2:4). He is not even concerned with factual error so much as misguided motivation. Even some 'Christian' teachings appeal to the flesh or the whims of the fleshly mind, even openly exploiting the flesh's desire to prove itself superior, instead of being rooted in grace, peace, and hope.

Though not physically present, Paul is "present in spirit*" because he cares about the Colossian believers personally, not merely as numbers to be credited to someone's spiritual ledger (2:5). Leaders who promote their own agendas or rules in order to acquire a following for themselves have been a problem since the early years of the church (e.g. Galatians 6:13 and Acts 20:30).

* Paul uses this expression on another occasion, in 1 Cor. 5:3-4. That situation was quite different, but in both cases Paul wanted to combine an assurance of his personal compassion with a firm statement of truth.

The gospel allows us to develop a new dimension in our relationships with each other, just as it brought a new dimension to the way that believers are able to seek God. Just as the blood of Christ swept away any need for us to justify ourselves, to make endless sacrifices, or to rely on an intermediary to approach God's presence, so also the gospel removes the world-imposed differences between human souls, and the need to compete with one another for scarce rewards.

The gospel makes genuine harmony and sincere love possible - which is why we are called to, "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3), instead of imposing unity on our own terms. True Christian growth is not competitive, and it does not impose artificial standards for evaluating one another. Genuine spiritual growth rejoices in every step forward that every believer makes, however insignificant it may seem from a worldly viewpoint.

The apostle praises the Christians in Colosse for their firm and orderly faith. In emphasizing 'order' (or 'discipline', in the NASB), Paul does not mean a regimented or highly structured approach, but rather one that keeps things in their proper place*. He hopes that the young Colossian congregation can maintain the kind of self-discipline that will keep them focused first and foremost on the gospel and the grace of Jesus, not on themselves or their desires.

* The word ταξις ("taxis") refers to a fitting arrangement or order. For example, it is used several times in Hebrews to refer to priesthood in the "order of Melchizedek" - that is, appropriate to Melchizedek.

So Paul again (see 1:23) calls the Colossians simply to continue to live in him, in Jesus (2:6-7). Live in him, be rooted in him, be built up in him. Everything is in Jesus and for Jesus - and again this can help us to distinguish truth from persuasive falsehoods. Our growth should always be founded on and rooted in the purity of Jesus' life, the grace of his death on the cross, and the hope of his empty tomb. Being strengthened in an understanding of Jesus leads also to overflowing thankfulness, expressed in humility - not pride, ambition, or judgment.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is it wrong in itself for a teaching to be 'fine-sounding'? What kind of roots would be appropriate for the gospel? How would these roots determine future growth? How could they affect our relationships with other believers? What kinds of order and firmness are appropriate to the gospel of Jesus?

The Contrast (Colossians 2:8)

The apostle recaps his last few ideas with a clear statement about the contrast between human wisdom and spiritual wisdom, between fleshly growth and growth in Jesus. He never denies that worldly methods and teachings can be very enticing, or that they can produce outward results - the problem is that they are built on a flawed foundation, not the firm foundation of Jesus.

In seeking the truth, we shall never be able to stop asking whether a teaching comes from the human mind or whether it comes from Jesus Christ (2:8). No mortal human will ever be sufficiently detached from his or her own flesh to be completely resistant to every possible way that we can be deceived, both by our own fleshly minds as well as the fleshly thoughts of others.

Christians rarely make a deliberate decision to believe a lie - rather, in our weakness we let ourselves be enticed and captured by something that tickles our ears by feeding our sense of self-importance, re-affirming our preconceptions, or making us feel superior. Many fine-sounding

things turn out to be, upon slight reflection, shallow or erroneous. This is why the apostle cautions against being "taken captive*" by "hollow and deceptive philosophy".

* The verb in the Greek text refers to an act of aggression, either kidnapping or robbing (in this case, with the vulnerable believers as the thing stolen, *i.e.* stolen from God).

The apostle does not ask us to become hardened cynics who are suspicious of everything, but he does want us to be able to recognize when a teaching or idea sounds 'Christian' yet rests on faulty foundations - for these are the ideas most hazardous to those who desire to follow Jesus.

Many of our beliefs simply reflect the preconceptions instilled in us by our culture, nation, or family; and the true seeker of truth will honestly question such assumptions, as opposed to merely searching for Scriptures that will 'back them up'. Other beliefs cater to the flesh's desire to distinguish itself by works, righteousness, or morality instead of by grace.

The foundation of Christ may look plain and unpromising to the flesh - just like a cross. But it is surer and it is fairer, for it puts us all on the same ground, valuing humility and forgiveness above any of the earthly skills and blessings that are distributed so unequally. Building on Jesus, likewise, requires humility and patience instead of cleverness and ambition. We can always obtain results or privileges by combining elements of the gospel with attractive worldly methods, but this cannot please God no matter how it looks on the outside.

"No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation ... his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light" (1 Corinthians 3:11-13). The test is not whether our ministry produces outward results, nor whether we obtain praise or privilege for it. The test is whether our ministry reflects the grace, truth, humility, and self-sacrifice of Jesus himself.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Paul warn us about being "taken captive"? What kinds of teachings could he have in mind? How could we recognize them? How can we tell whether we are building on the foundation of Jesus?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Six: Nailed To The Cross (Colossians 2:9-15)

Paul has mentioned several ways that the cross of Christ can completely change our relationship with God and our relationships with one another. In this next passage, he re-emphasizes this with vivid images that illustrate the full power and range of the blood of Jesus. The grace of the gospel is both more encouraging and more provocative than we generally realize.

Previously In Colossians (Colossians 1:21-2:8)

It is not easy for mortal minds to grasp the gospel in all its depth and power. Indeed, Paul calls it a 'mystery' that is filled with "glorious riches". But God graciously reveals this 'mystery' to us, along with the many things it teaches us. The promises and truth of the gospel stand in sharp contrast with the superficiality and instability of human-made philosophies and theologies.

Of all the deep implications of the gospel, Paul particularly singles out the mystery of Christ living in us, and we in him (1:21-29). We have been completely transformed by the cross: our sins once made us God's enemies, but now we are blameless in his sight. Thus we are one with him and with Jesus, through whom God revealed this and many other aspects of the 'mystery'.

In Jesus are also found the treasures of all true wisdom and knowledge (2:1-8). It is natural for us to desire to take root, to grow, and to build on the past. All this is quite healthy so long as we build on the foundation of the gospel's grace, hope, and truth. But if we build on our human self-will or agendas, then we shall drift from God's presence even if we accomplish outward results.

Throughout the epistle, there is a sharp contrast between worldly wisdom and the gospel. Worldly wisdom promises things that last only a short time, while the gospel promises lasting blessings. Worldly wisdom appeals to the flesh's desires and whims, while the gospel appeals to the deeper needs of the soul and the spirit. Worldly wisdom is merely clever, for it is inherently deceptive and self-serving; the gospel is truthful in every respect and thus is truly wise.

The Fullness Of The Godhead (Colossians 2:9-10)

God has always wanted above all for his creations to live in his presence and to know him. Yet it is a basic struggle even for believers to see the implications of this. In proclaiming the gospel, God held back nothing - it reflects all of his fullness through the grace, hope, and assurance it offers. He thus calls us to understand the gospel, rather than adding our flimsy speculations to it.

Jesus represented the fullness of the Godhead* in bodily form (2:9). The apostle has now said this a number of times, because it is a point worth reiterating. Every quality about God that is spiritually significant, and that can be grasped by the mortal mind, is displayed in Jesus' life and character. No, we cannot deduce from Jesus the answers to many of the doctrinal or methodological debates that arouse our passions, because those are irrelevant to God. We can see in Jesus a full display of grace, truth, patience, love, self-control, and much more besides.

* There is no perfect English translation for the word in the original text. The NIV, NASB, and most recent versions use 'deity' (or 'Deity'), while the KJV uses 'Godhead', which actually means "God-hood". Perhaps the closest we could come would be 'God-ness', that is, the qualities inherent in being God.

The idea of fullness* in Christ, which the apostle again emphasizes, thus goes in two directions (2:10). Jesus represents and personifies the fullness and completeness of God, while in each believer Jesus' fullness and completeness now live and can be seen (or at least, should be seen) by those around us. This fullness and completeness - in both directions - means a fullness of grace, a fullness of hope, a fullness of security, rather than promising the worldly kind of completeness ('you can have it all!') that our flesh may desire. Jesus meant the same thing when he said that, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

* Where the NIV has "given fullness in Christ", the NASB has "in Him you have been made complete". The original text literally says, "you have been filled in him".

The apostle also reminds us that Jesus is the head over "every power and authority*", by his very nature. When we are in Jesus, no human on earth is greater than us, and they all "would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:11). Yet note Jesus' treatment of worldly rulers and authorities - he freely criticized them when appropriate, and he did not care what they thought of him, yet his opposition was completely non-violent and was devoid of self-interest. In this way too he sets us an example.

* This phrase re-appears in verse 15 - see the notes on that verse below.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Paul keep reiterating that Jesus embodies the fullness of God? Is it important to us in ways that it may not have been to the Colossians? Does Paul help us to know what it means to have "fullness in Christ"? What should it mean to us that Jesus is the head of every power and authority?

The New Way To Know God (Colossians 2:11-12)

Not only the ancient Israelites, but almost every religious culture has sought a form of salvation through following the right rules and learning the right teachings. Jesus brought a "new and living way" to know God and to serve God. By better understanding what happens when we believe in Jesus and are baptized into him, we can better understand many other things.

The gospel instituted a new and far more perfect form of circumcision, compared with the rite used in the old covenant (2:11). This is a spiritual circumcision, not the removal of a bit of excess flesh but the complete "putting off of the flesh (or sinful nature)*", for the gospel now allows us to live without having our thoughts and actions dominated our desires and whims. The gospel makes it possible to be "controlled not by the sinful nature (or flesh) but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you" (Romans 8:9).

* The Greek word σαρξ ("sarx") means 'flesh' in a more general sense than our English word does. It includes the concept of our natural (mortal) desires and impulses. The NASB generally translates it literally as "flesh" regardless of the context. The NIV often translates it as "sinful nature" when the context suggests that it is being contrasted with the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, or spiritual values.

Moreover, the gospel offers a universal "circumcision", not limited to Jews, to males, or to any particular group. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Human believers will always struggle and wrestle with putting this into practice, but we can know once for all that God does truly see us in this light.

Being buried with Jesus and then raised with him strengthens our personal identification with him and his fullness (2:12). To be buried in baptism expresses our choice to accept Jesus henceforth as our Lord, without regret or looking back. Baptism's physical action is symbolic in this respect*, and the apostle here refers back to it (see also Romans 6:1-3) as a concrete reminder of our decision to abandon both sin and legalistic religion, nailing both to the cross.

* The physical actions normally practiced in baptism by immersion today usually differ in some of the details from the ways baptisms tended to be performed in the 1st century AD. It is the general symbolism of burial and the expression of a death to sin and law, not the details of the physical actions, that matter.

Jesus was "declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4), and now we along with him have been raised from the dead spiritually. And we can begin to receive some of our eternal blessings now, in this life, because of our spiritual rebirth. We can now live with God's presence nearby, we can know the relief of complete forgiveness of sins, and - if we desire to do so - we can begin at once seeing the ways that a human life can be transformed when we discard our pride, selfish ambitions, and resentments.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What comparison does Paul have in mind with the image of circumcision? How is it different from literal circumcision? What kind of death do we undergo in baptism? How is it a raising? What real changes come about in baptism? Does this help us to understand what matters about baptism in practice?

Fully Forgiven, Fully Alive (Colossians 2:13-15)

Because the apostle understands how hard it is for us to believe that God has completely forgiven our sins, he reiterates the same point with different images in order to emphasize that we really have been completely and unconditionally forgiven in Jesus. God's victory is complete, and his grace is unlimited - which means that believers in Christ are now completely alive.

Once we understand our need for grace and forgiveness, we can appreciate why it is good news to be told that, "God made you alive" (2:13). Selfishness and pride make us dead by nature, for they push God's presence far away from us. Once we are separated from God, we also become powerless to get back into his presence by our own power, knowledge, or good deeds. Lasting life, then, is only available through Christ, his blood, and his grace.

This addresses two different spiritual disorders. The apostle openly refutes those who think that they are 'not as bad' as others. Each of us can only know God and be saved through his unconditional grace, gratefully accepted and humbly remembered by us. And to those who think themselves too sinful for Jesus to save, he addresses their inverse pride by reminding them of Jesus' power, for "the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Corinthians 1:25).

On the cross, Jesus not only atoned for humanity's sins but also cancelled the written code, the law (2:14). This dimension of Christianity challenges some of our culture's most adamantly held beliefs, but the law was among "the things opposed to us*". We love rules and laws because they allow us to pass judgment, to feel superior to those who cannot follow our favorite rules, and to wreak punishment on those who trespass. But none of this is spiritually healthy.

* Note also God's attitude towards his own laws: "sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased by them, although the law required them to be made" (Hebrews 10:8). God was displeased not with the sacrifices themselves, but with the whole method of necessitating humans coming to him by law, ritual, and other methods that were inherently inferior and second-hand.

The death of the law means that the entire body of the laws of Moses and other accumulated regulations are now obsolete, inactive, and powerless ("and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear", Hebrews 8:13) - but it also means much more than that. The cross did not merely bring an end to the laws of Moses and of Israel; it brought an end to the whole way of attempting to know God through rules. It ushered in a permanent era of grace, in which the obstacles of rule-keeping and reliance on human intercessors have now been permanently discarded.

It was by God's decision that this took place. Any set of rules is inherently beyond human ability, and is inherently discriminatory. The cross announces a way to know God and to be saved that is completely fair and equal for everyone. And so, if we put it into practice as it was intended, we too shall not hinder those trying to seek God by becoming attached to our own favorite laws and methods. We are called to trust our brothers and sisters in Jesus enough to let them live by grace, and to love unbelievers enough to let them be saved by grace.

God celebrated his victory at the cross by making a "public spectacle" of every false authority and self-appointed ruler* (2:15). This verse contains a series of images that dramatically reverse the natural association of death on a cross with humiliation, agony and death. The cross of Jesus is able to transform believers so completely because it so completely transformed and overturned the usual meanings of execution, judgment, and death.

* This phrase is usually interpreted to include not only all earthly authorities, but also whatever celestial beings do not or may not accept God's authority.

The first image is of universal disarmament*. At the cross, God proclaimed that no human has spiritual authority over any other human, and that no human depends on another for salvation. Humans do have many ways to kill and oppress each other's bodies, but the cross made our souls forever free from human rule. God not only disarmed false rulers but also exposed them and their boastful claims (the "public spectacle" or "public display") as powerless and empty.

* The verb literally means to disrobe or strip someone's clothes off - figuratively, it means to despoil a defeated enemy, rendering him helpless. (This is why the KJV simply says, "spoiled".)

These are summed up in the image of God's triumph, using language that deliberately calls to mind the traditional Roman processions of victory in which victorious Roman leaders would be celebrated while their defeated enemies were dragged along in chains behind them. God's triumph, though, is not boastful or spiteful. He defeated the powers ranged against our souls not so much out of hate for them as out of love and compassion for us in our spiritual imprisonment - which the cross brought to an end, if we are willing to accept the gospel as God proclaimed it.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: In what sense does the cross make us 'alive'? How did it cancel the law? What are the implications of this? Why are they hard for us to accept? In what sense did the cross expose and disarm false authorities? Why did he let them retain physical power? How does God's triumph differ from earthly victories?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Seven: Since You Died With Christ (Colossians 2:16-23)

Paul now proceeds to a careful critique of the specific erroneous teachings that have been troubling the Colossian Christians. It is significant that he does so only after his extensive description of the fullness and spiritual power that are found in the basics of the gospel itself. And the apostle is careful to present his conclusions as direct implications of the gospel truths.

Review (Colossians 2:1-15) & Preview (Colossians 2:16-3:10)

After his vivid and memorable summary of all the spiritual blessings that are freely and fully available through the gospel of Jesus, the apostle now details some of the implications that most directly apply to the situation in Colosse. Through Jesus we died to sin, to judgment, and to legalistic religion; and through him we rose to live a new life. Both have powerful implications.

We are transformed by the cross of Jesus when we accept the gospel of grace. In the gospel, we find all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:1-8), for we can learn everything of spiritual importance through getting to know Jesus, who he was, and what he did. Then also, our sins as well as the law and its power to condemn were nailed to the cross along with Jesus (2:9-15), so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, not in the old way of the written code.

The next part of Colossians details some direct consequences of our transformation through the gospel. First, the apostle explains that since we have died with Christ, we can learn to live by faith and grace instead of by laws and rules (2:16-23). Then also, since we have been raised with Christ, we can learn to live in purity and selflessness (3:1-10). Together, these concepts establish the practical side of our transformation through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Shadows & Realities (Colossians 2:16-17)

Everything in the Old Covenant was never more than a shadow of the things to come in Jesus; and even though the elements of the Old Covenant came directly from God himself, he always knew that they were imperfect and temporary. How much more so are the religious elements and teachings that humans devise - the believer who has died with Christ has no need for them.

Since the accusatory power of the law was nailed to the cross, we should "not let anyone judge you" (2:16) because of what we do or what we decline to do. We are called to encourage one another to serve, sometimes to caution others not to go astray, but not to evaluate someone else's relationship with God. "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4*).

* Romans 14 deals with several controversial questions, yet Paul deliberately avoids determining which views are 'right' or 'wrong', instead exhorting everyone to live by grace and to show grace to one another.

First Paul reminds us not to judge one another by questionable things someone may do, such as eating or drinking*. Paul knows that there are many things that it is wise for Christians to avoid, or at the most to use in great moderation. Yet he urges us not to make arbitrary rules about them, but instead to help one another learn through prayer and study what is good and what is bad.

* The specific rules enacted by the Colossian church probably included a mix of Jewish laws and rules adopted from Gentile sources. This is clearer in the last part of the verse (see below).

The complement to this is that we also should not judge each other by what someone does not or cannot do. The text refers to special events and celebrations* that were important to the new teachers in Colosse. Many of them were harmless in themselves, and perhaps some even had a small positive aspect to them. But overriding all such questions is the fact that they had been made a basis for judgment, according to who did or not participate in them. No outward activity, then or now, can ever be an accurate indication of the relationship someone has with God.

* These are more obviously a mix of Jewish special days and Gentile practices. The details of most of them can no longer be known, because Paul was not interested in dissecting whether they were good or bad in themselves - all that mattered for the time being was that they had been imposed on the Colossians.

Spiritual reality is found in Christ and only in Christ - only closeness to him and oneness with him can give us a relationship with his Father through grace (2:17). The contrast between old and new, law and grace, is also a contrast between shadow and reality*. To mortal humans, physical things seem real and tangible - but in truth, these things are fragile shadows that will not last. The spiritual things that now seem intangible and hazy are actually permanent and reliable.

* The book of Hebrews develops this idea at length in chapters 8 through 10, specifically in reference to the Jewish law and its many components and practices (especially the sacrificial system).

This is one reason why rules, laws, and traditions cannot form the basis of a healthy relationship with God. "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship." (Hebrews 10:1). If this is true of the laws drafted by God himself, how can we claim anything better for the rules that we humans concoct?

Growing close to God comes much more naturally if we stop relying on human-made things and put our faith in the gospel of Jesus. If we just take the time to realize and appreciate what God has done, we find so much more power, more truth, more reality, than we could ever create with our own human religions. Following rules and methods may benefit the flesh, but to nourish the soul we must discard them and instead let grace, faith, and spiritual hope reign over us.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is it important not to let others judge us? What exactly does Paul mean by, "do not let"? In what sense are religious laws, rituals, and the like "shadows"? Are there ways we can learn to see this more clearly?

Losing Connections With The Head (Colossians 2:18-19)

Paul does not accuse the false teachers at Colosse of deliberate malice, nor does he undertake a point-by-point refutation of their teachings. Instead, he explains something more basic and more important, by showing that their whole way of approaching the gospel stands in contrast with the values of the gospel. Their so-called 'gospel' has no connection with the cross of Jesus Christ.

The apostle's description of an unspiritual* mind is not meant to condemn as much as it is meant to warn us against developing this kind of mentality (2:18). He describes some characteristics to avoid - and each of them, sadly, often seems desirable to unwary Christians. False humility can be tempting to any believer, and religious persons have even developed some tried-and-true ways of practicing it. False humility can also cause some of the other disorders that Paul mentions.

* In the original text, "mind of (the) flesh" or - as it is translated in the NASB - "fleshly mind".

The toxic visitors to Colosse have also been busy promoting the worship of angels*, plus a collection of theological speculations Paul refers to as "idle notions**". The details of these are not given, and they are completely unimportant except insofar as we learn to recognize similar distractions ourselves. Although these theories and teachings were spiritually pointless and completely hypothetical, their promoters provided 'proofs' that convinced the gullible Colossians.

* Ironically, some commentators speculate at length over exactly what this might mean (did they worship specific angels, worship angels in general, or did they attempt to deduce how angels worshiped, &c.), when the whole point in the epistle is that just this type of idle theorizing should be avoided.

** Literally, "things (or matters) he has intruded into". Note that the NASB interprets the sentence structure of this verse differently than the NIV, resulting in a slightly different emphasis.

Even experienced Christians today are led astray by such irrelevant teachings, rambling on about things we have "seen" or "heard", instead of keeping the focus on the extraordinary nature of the gospel itself. It is human nature to over-value speculation and to under-appreciate perspective. We should make sure not to "let them disqualify (NASB: "defraud") you". There will never be a shortage of false teachings - each of us is responsible for seeking the truth for himself or herself.

Yet the real problem is not the folly or even the incorrectness of these teachings in themselves - the real problem is that these rule-makers and speculators have lost connection with the head, Jesus, and are no longer sharing in mutual support with the other parts of the body, the church (2:19). They have indulged themselves, sought a following for themselves, and are seeking to mold the church into what they want it to be rather than accepting it the way God established it.

In reading the imagery of ligaments and sinews (recall too 1 Corinthians 12), we are not meant to deduce the special significance of the specific body parts, but are instead to think about the proper basis of Christian growth and living. We are called to remain connected with each other in mutual respect and support, not seeking to get our own way in the church; and above all we are called to remain connected with the grace and blood of Jesus, never forgetting our need for it and never wandering from its truths in pursuit of pleasing the flesh or tickling the ears.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Paul call these intrusive teachers "unspiritual" (or fleshly)? What is wrong with the things they are emphasizing? Why are believers so often attracted to them anyway? How can we recognize similar disruptions today? Does Paul help us know how to address them?

The Problem With Rules (Colossians 2:20-23)

The apostle makes a two-fold appeal for us to give up rules and laws as a basis for seeking God. First, they are inherently in contrast with the nature of the gospel, and the call to live by grace without making spiritual comparisons or competitions with one another. Second, they do not accomplish what their makers think they do - they can never bring about genuine inward change.

There is an inherent absurdity in being dead to the world, yet continuing to submit to its rules* (2:20-21). The problem, in Colosse then and in the church today, is that we do not like to take personal responsibility for our beliefs or their actions. Human-made rules, doctrines, methods, and traditions relieve us of the responsibility for thinking and for seeking the truth on our own.

* Note that Paul here is speaking about rules in terms of their use in spiritual ministry, learning, and growth. Dealing with earthly laws and secular authorities is a different topic, not addressed directly in this passage. Note too that he is criticizing the use of regulations as a basis for judgment, reward, and punishment - the discussion has nothing to do with routine expedients, such as times or places of assembly,

that merely involve a more-or-less arbitrary selection from several equally plausible choices. These only become a problem when we begin to think that some are 'right' and others are 'wrong'.

When our flesh is comfortable with our surroundings, we derive false security from thinking and doing the same things as everyone else. When we are unhappy or uncomfortable, we can find a rule, a method, or a teaching to blame. In all such cases, we are simply avoiding the responsibility that God has given each of us for developing a personal awareness of his presence, seeking his truths from our hearts, and giving him a personal response to his gospel.

These rules and the things they regulate* are "destined to perish with use" (2:22). It is inherently unhealthy to place our primary emphasis on regulating outward behavior, for it is not what enters us or touches us that makes us spiritually unclean, but rather, "what comes out of a man is what makes him unclean" (Mark 7:20). When we enforce standards of outward behavior, thinking (or rationalizing) that this leads to spiritual growth, we are building on a flawed foundation. "First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean." (Matthew 23:26)

* The original text is ambiguous as to which of these it is saying will "perish with use", but it is a valid observation on both ends. Note that the NASB and NIV translators came to different conclusions.

Paul acknowledges that all these outward regulations, as well as the theological speculations, do indeed have the "appearance of wisdom" (2:23). Human-made methods and theologies can be very attractive on the outside (fittingly), for the reasons the apostle mentions: they make us feel "religious" by giving us a seemingly objective 'standard' to follow. But feeling good about ourselves for the wrong reasons is merely a form of false humility (NASB: "self-abasement").

The apostle leaves no room for doubt or debate about the ineffectiveness of regulating outward behavior through rules and methodology: "they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence". Regardless of how wise we may appear to be when we tell someone to follow our rules because they will eventually lead to spiritual growth, such an approach can only produce artificial behavior modification, not the true spiritual growth that God desires.

Trying to seek God backwards produces pride in those who successfully follow a program, and frustration and discouragement for those who fall short. When we think that our rules and methods 'work', it is because we made them in such a way so as to favor ourselves. The law and rule approach creates one class of the self-righteous and another class of the self-condemned.

Fleshly goals can be obtained by worldly means, but the ends that God most desires us to pursue can only be reached by more spiritual means. It is an unfortunate aspect of human nature that even Christians do not know how to conduct themselves without rigid structures - but this is something that has been instilled; it is not inevitable. With faith and a stronger sense of responsibility, we can learn to seek God in a more natural way, and can help others do the same.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What specific kinds of rules does Paul tell us not to follow? Can we tell what he wants us to do when someone tries to force us to follow them? What kinds of 'rules' are outside of this discussion? In what sense do outward regulations "perish with use"? Can we learn to recognize "the appearance of wisdom"?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

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

Paul has explained how dying with Christ enables us to live by faith and grace, rather than by law and rules. Now he describes the other half of the picture: being raised with Christ allows us to live in purity and selflessness, instead of striving to fulfill our desires and whims. Together, these two ideas illustrate how to put into practice our transformation through the cross.

Review Of Colossians 2

Our transformation through the cross of Jesus has many spiritual implications. The core truths of the gospel provide a wellspring of spiritual wisdom that nourishes spiritual growth, while at the same time the cross brought about the death of sin, law, and self. The cross frees us from the need to come to God through rules, rituals, or any other kind of religious obligations.

Because Jesus and the gospel contain the treasures of all wisdom and knowledge (2:1-8), we do not need to turn to human theologies, methods, or traditions to gain necessary insights into our relationship with God. Because sin, law, and self were all nailed to the cross (2:9-15), there are no impediments to each individual believer knowing God for himself or herself.

Since we died with Christ, we no longer judge others or ourselves by human rules or authority (2:16-23). Even the traditions, priests, and practices in God's own law were mere shadows of the reality that was to come, and has now come, in Jesus. Our calling is neither to enforce old laws nor to invent new ones, but instead to remain connected with the head and body of Jesus.

The problem with using rules as a way of knowing God is two-fold. They are contrary to the entire nature of the cross, which emphasizes grace and (as we shall see in this coming passage) responsibility instead of law and tradition. Rules are also ineffective in leading to inward change: those who succeed in following rules feel good about themselves for the wrong reasons, while those who do not measure up to some 'standard' wallow in excessive guilt or frustration.

Christ Is Your Life (Colossians 3:1-4)

The idea of being raised from the dead is powerful, both symbolically and practically. To say that Christians are "born again" is a statement with implications that we often do not wish to address. Our rebirth calls us to look beyond this world for meaning, to look at everything and everyone from a new perspective, and henceforth to orient everything in our lives around Jesus.

Since we have now been raised with Christ, we are called to look above this world and to look beyond this life for meaning (3:1-2). Instead of being obsessed and preoccupied with everything going on here, where sin and self reign, we are called to look to eternity, where Christ is already seated at the Father's side* and is waiting for us. Why would we not want to look at that? Yet we often do not, because we stubbornly insist that God should be the one to change his priorities.

* This common image is worth studying in its own right. See also, for example, Luke 22:69, Ephesians 1:20, and Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, and 12:2. It is not meant literally, but rather combines several thoughts into one image: the perfect completeness of Jesus' ministry, his eternal closeness with the Father, &c.

Setting our minds and hearts on "things above*" does not come easily to the flesh, yet the soul very much wants to do it. Setting our minds on eternal things and pulling our minds off of earthly things goes together, because our minds and hearts will always want something to focus upon. There is no method or technique to doing this, because it is a matter of perspective.

* Verse 1 literally says to 'seek' things above, while verse 2 literally says to have them (or put them) in mind. The NASB's "the things above" is probably more precise than merely "things above" in the NIV.

We shall always be bombarded by trivial earthly stimuli. So it is a matter of self-control that we learn to filter out the world's hype and self-promotion, as well as its controversies and crises, so that we can expand our awareness of the things that truly matter. If there is a practical guideline, it is that we should help each other to think and talk about the things that really matter to God, instead of indulging one another in obsessing over our myriad trivial earthly concerns.

"Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34); what we talk about tells us what matters to us. We should not and cannot make rules about what we can talk about, but rather should listen to our own conversations so that they can reveal what is really in our hearts.

Paul describes the Christian life as being "hidden with Christ" (3:3-4). This expression emphasizes the differences between the ways we think of our lives and the way God thinks of our lives. The life of a believer in Jesus is 'hidden'* in several ways. Our souls - the essence of who we are - are kept safe in Christ and shall not be fully revealed until later. Much about our earthly lives is also hidden in Jesus: every one of us does things that everyone notices (and either criticizes or praises), but these are rarely the things that really matter to God. The things in our hearts and minds, known only to us or to a very few others, generally matter more to God.

* There is also a different sense in which our lives are hidden, in that our sins and flaws are covered when we are 'clothed with Christ'. But in the context here in Colossians 3, the expression seems intended primarily to emphasize the broader ideas above.

This entire passage, especially in connection with the end of Colossians 2, emphasizes to us that there is an inexorable link between grace and responsibility. Genuine responsibility is not possible under law, for we simply follow the rules as best we can and then accept reward or punishment accordingly - under such conditions, even the most zealous rule following is merely self-interest, not responsibility or any other positive quality.

Conversely, if we accept God's grace but do not accept the accompanying responsibilities - forgiving others, seeking to know God for his own sake rather than for reward or pleasure, trusting his values rather than the world's - then we have not at all grasped what grace means.

Jesus is our life - not the church, not our families and friends, not our jobs and hobbies, but Jesus. Christians generally define Jesus in terms of his perceived "relevance" to the things that they really care about, instead of the other way around. When he appears, "you also will appear with him in glory"; yet at that time it will also be revealed how we have answered his question to Peter: "do you truly love me more than these?" (John 21:15).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What are the "things above" we should think about? What are the "earthly things" we should not think about? How does an understanding of grace lead to a sense of responsibility? Why is a genuine sense of responsibility not possible under law? How does grace change this?

Leaving The Past Behind (Colossians 3:5-8)

Our new life is built on a new foundation, and as such it gives us both the opportunity and the responsibility to leave behind a lot of the things that characterized the old life. The cross exposes our sins and our selfish desires for the shabby impediments to lasting joy that they truly are, while the resurrection gives us the power to make real, lasting changes that nourish the soul.

The apostle calls for the death*, not a mere suppression, of the earthly nature within us (3:5-6). As he has emphasized previously, this cannot be accomplished by laws and rules. It is only possible because "The grace of God that brings salvation ... teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions" (Titus 2:11-12). Only if we live by grace can our 'No' to sin be a sincere expression of faith and love for God, instead of a mere attempt to avoid punishment.

* Here, the NIV phrasing "put to death" is more accurate than the NASB's passive rendering. The word in the Greek text is an active verb, calling for action to be taken. The original text can be interpreted differently in a separate respect, as a fully literal translation could read, "put to death therefore the members on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, ...". Note the resultant phrasing in different versions.

In the list of sins we are to "put to death" (see also verse 8), we find some of the usual suspects, such as immorality and 'evil desires*', which many Christians enthusiastically denounce. Yet there are some sacred cows that also get prodded here, because the apostle equates greed and materialism with idolatry, and later (verse 8) he will issue the same warning against slander as he does against 'filthy language'. So, if the wrath of God will come against such things, we should take steps to purify our own hearts instead of merely denouncing the sins of others.

* The original text merely says, "bad desire" (singular), that is, desire for things that we should not desire.

This means that the importance of cleansing is even greater, not less, when we live under grace instead of under law - yet it can also come much more naturally under grace (3:7-8). In the past - whether an individual Christian's past or the days before Jesus when law reigned over God's people - "you walked in these ways".

The law imposed heavy requirements, but it also led believers to feel that they had no need to do anything not explicitly required by the law. Grace "teaches us to say 'No'" in that it calls us to be motivated by love, humility, and gratitude - forces less tangible but potentially far more powerful than reward and punishment, provided that we seek the soul's needs instead of the flesh's desires.

In addition to avoiding the more rudimentary sins mentioned above, Paul now calls for believers to develop clean hearts and clean lips. The link between hearts and speech comes into play in many contexts, as there is a natural link. The apostle's call for us to think and speak in purity is another example of grace and responsibility in action together. When we receive grace from God, he asks us to give the same grace to others. Yet there are no rules - there is no list of specific words we cannot use, just the overall responsibility to use words properly at all times, whether there are specific rules in place or not. God calls us to grow and learn from the heart.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does understanding the gospel motivate us to "put to death" sinful things? What does it mean to put them to death - simply not committing them, or something else? Why are problems like greed and slander just as bad as sexual immorality and rage? Does this passage tell us how to pursue these goals?

The New Self - Introduction (Colossians 3:9-10)

The new self in the Christian life is meant to be a reality, not merely a slogan. The Christian life involves more than merely discarding negative things, and it means more than simply adding a few new habits to our old ways. Seeking truth and living by truth is now essential, for it is the foundation to many other things that we are called to do together.

The apostle's call to truthfulness (3:9) opens a new series of thoughts that will continue in the passage we shall study next time. Connecting his admonitions against sin with his description of the new self, Paul urges us not to lie to each other, because the gospel calls us to be aware of things that are vital to our spiritual health even when they frighten the flesh. "Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ." (Ephesians 4:15)

To speak the truth in love has no relation to the common (bad) habit of critiquing everyone's ways of living, worshiping, or serving. Our calling is to see and accept spiritual truths, and thus to develop spiritual and eternal perspectives on everything, even when others resist them. God calls us to develop the spiritual courage to accept everything that Scripture teaches, whether encouraging or sobering, popular or unpopular - and God hopes that we will then call others to face these same truths.

The call to renewal is central to a genuine understanding of the cross, and it is far more meaningful than mere outward changes (3:10). Once we have "put on the new self", we are a new creation at that moment; but there is more. We are continually renewed, for we receive continual grace and now also have a never-ending source of power, wisdom, and life. "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). Yet this kind of genuine, deep-rooted transformation can come about only if we accept the full truth of the gospel, live by the truth, and teach others the truth.

* Literally, we have 'clothed ourselves' with the new self. The verb is the same as that used in Galatians 3:27, in the phrase usually translated, "... have clothed yourselves with Christ."

We are only at the beginning of the apostle's thoughts on the new self - we shall continue with them next time.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does Paul mean by the "new self"? Why is truthfulness so central to it? In what sense are we continually 'renewed'? What other aspects of the new self might we expect to read about next?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, October 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Nine: Christ Is All, & Is In All (Colossians 3:11-17)

In describing the ways that the gospel can transform us through its depth and power, Paul has introduced the concept of the new self. This image describes a believer who has thrown off both legalism and selfish desires, and who accepts the responsibility to seek God through grace. Since Christ is all, and is in all of us, he can affect every important aspect of our lives.

Previously In Colossians - Since You ... (Colossians 2:16-23-3:10)

The two most basic changes that the gospel brings about arise directly from the two major truths of the gospel: the crucifixion and the resurrection. On the cross, our old selves died with Jesus, along with the guilt for our sins and the power of law to condemn us. Then, through the resurrection, we were reborn with Jesus, free from the power of old fleshly thoughts and desires.

Since we died with Christ, we have been freed from the power of law, so that we no longer have to use rules as a way to seek God (2:16-23). We thus have full and complete spiritual freedom. We can accept grace unconditionally, and can live in God's presence without earning it.

Since we were raised with Christ, we have been freed from the power of self, so that we no longer have to serve our own desires and whims (3:1-10). Grace comes with responsibility: since we no longer have laws and rules to follow, we also can no longer hide behind them. We are called to leave past temptations behind, not because of rules but because they are worthless for anyone who appreciates God's grace and the blood of Jesus that made it possible.

The new self lives by truth - not by fussing and arguing over trivial facts, but by calling attention to spiritual truths even when they are uncomfortable. Those raised with Christ can see this world for what it is. We can look past this world's worm's-eye perspective to get a glimpse of Jesus seated at God's side, and can help one another to move forward towards our lasting home.

The New Life & The New Community (Colossians 3:11)

Unlike the old law, the gospel is able to break down the barriers and arbitrary distinctions that dictate so much of our lives in this world. Yet this outpouring of grace also comes with spiritual responsibility - not merely the basic calling to discard our prejudices and biases, but also the responsibility to build something new and positive in place of the world's perspectives.

The gospel's transcendent truths transform believers so completely that there is no longer any spiritual distinction between Greek or Jew, or between slave or free (3:11). Our earthly lives are still limited by the world's attitudes and laws; but our freedom in Christ allows us to look beyond our worldly identities. Paul doubly emphasizes the abolition of the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and he further calls us to welcome even those we look down on ("barbarians*") or even fear (exemplified by Scythians**). And even slaves are now our spiritual equals in Jesus.

* "Barbarian" originally referred to someone speaking an incomprehensible language. The Greeks thought that anyone who did not speak Greek must be an uncouth, vulgar person - hence the now-familiar meaning.

** The Scythians were a nomadic people who, during the 1st century AD, mostly lived along the north shore of the Black Sea. Feared for their cruelty, they frequently attacked Asia Minor and the Middle East.

There are many parallels to this in the New Testament, such as Paul's description to the Galatians* about being clothed with Christ instead of with earthly identities (Galatians 3:28). Similar to Colossians 3:11, this verse also mentions male and female as being fully equal in Jesus. Another parallel is the apostle's description of the gospel tearing down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14-15). The same imagery can be applied to many other socio-economic barriers that the world is incapable of overcoming.

* Some of the problems in Galatia bore a resemblance to the trouble in Colosse, but Paul's tone in the two letters makes it clear that the problem in the Galatian churches were much worse.

So, as new creations with a new perspective, we "regard no one from a worldly point of view*" (2 Corinthians 5:16-17). Indeed, "we once regarded Christ in this way", for it is easy to be quite 'religious' and yet have little closeness with God. Once we ourselves become aware of God's presence, we quickly see how irrelevant the world's categorizations of us really are - and from there it is a simple (though humbling) step to look at others with the same new perspective.

* Literally, "according to the flesh", as it is translated in the NASB.

This new identity brings many blessings. Even though the world's limitations still constrain us, God has placed no limits on our souls; and he has made all souls genuinely equal. It means that we can each serve God in the ways that, to the best of our mortal understanding, he has called us to do. It means that we are never spiritually accountable to any human authority or to any human-designated standard of results. God knows our hearts and he knows who we really are.

Yet the new identity also comes with significant responsibilities. God lets us make mistakes, by allowing us to know him personally and to attempt to understand what he is telling us with our mere mortal minds. He does not get angry with our errors, but he does expect us to be humble about them. Pride, excuses, and evasions have no place for those who have put on the new self.

Since God has eliminated the world's socio-economic barriers, he calls us to embrace the whole body of Christ, to draw close to those different from us, and to see how our actions and attitudes affect others. Our bodies may have different needs, but the needs of each soul are the same.

It is human nature that we each desire a personal version of the gospel, and hope to have the church concentrate on fulfilling our own desires (or, as we usually call them, 'needs') - but there is not a gospel for Americans and a gospel for other cultures; there is not a gospel for men and a gospel for women; there is not a gospel for the old and a gospel for the young. There is one gospel, and so in a healthy body we shall each be closely connected to all the other parts.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is the purpose of verses like Colossians 3:11 and Galatians 3:28? How literally does God want us to take them? How do the world's classifications continue to affect us? Should the church acknowledge them at all? How do these ideas fit in with the overall themes of Colossians?

New Clothes (Colossians 3:12-14)

The new community in Christ is characterized by the fruits of the Spirit, for Jesus does not call us to make mere outward changes. He asks us to put on new clothing, covering ourselves not with talents or achievements but with fruits of the Spirit. Jesus wants others to realize that patience, humility, and grace are more important to our identities than any fleshly characteristics.

The New Testament transfers the identity of God's "chosen* people" from physical Israel to the church of Christ - and this too brings responsibilities as well as blessings (3:12). Thus the apostle indicates how to recognize God's people; and it is not by their hostility to sinners or their energetic pursuit of results, but instead by the fruits of the Spirit.

* The KJV translates the word as "elect", in the (older) sense of 'being called' or 'being selected'.

The fruits of the Spirit are not merely by-products or sidelights: we are to 'put (them) on'; they are to be our new 'clothes*'. Our compassion, humility, gentleness, and patience should be so obvious that others notice them even more than they notice our outward appearance or talents. This responsibility comes with grace - realizing the depth of our need for the cross makes it easier to live by these unassuming virtues instead of seeking to compete with the world on its own terms. "All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another" (John 13:35).

* The verb in this verse literally means to "put on", but the form used here invariably refers to clothing.

There is always a strong link between grace, love, and unity (3:13-14). Even those clothed with the new self must still live for now in the real world, and are still weak in the flesh. Even in Christian relationships there will be disappointments, hurts, and misunderstandings. Jesus' call is not to analyze these or to require compensation for them - both of these expectations are in direct contradiction with the meaning of the gospel. Instead we are to follow Jesus' example and pray, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Genuine love can only be selfless love. Genuine love must set aside the compulsion to judge, to critique, to resent. Because we have been raised with Christ, we can replace these things with a deeper understanding of human weakness, and a sincere awareness of how much God has forgiven us of. This - not outward conformity, not methodology, not results - is the basis of the kind of genuine oneness and unity that God seeks for his people.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it mean to be a chosen people? What can we learn from Israel's history about the blessings and responsibilities involved? In what sense can we 'clothe ourselves' with spiritual qualities? How can Christians learn to forgive without expecting compensation or punishment?

Living In The New Community (Colossians 3:15-17)

The truest expression of Jesus' lordship is found not in displays of force or authority, but in the presence of peace and sincere unity. In Jesus' body - the new community formed of those who have put on the new self - there are no rigid laws, and thus the residents of the new community are called to live without the world's preoccupation with short-term reward and punishment.

To let peace rule is a natural consequence of understanding the gospel and the nature of our Messiah Jesus (3:15). As with every other spiritual fruit, the peace of God must first grow in and reign in our hearts. Since we are members of one body, it makes no sense to manipulate one another or compete with one another - for then the body is divided against itself.

God understands that this is not easy, for we all have different things that we expect or desire from being part of the body - and this is where thankfulness comes in. For all of the defects that most churches have, most also bless their members in a number of ways. It is our choice whether we decide to dwell on (and resent) the imperfections, or to be thankful for the blessings.

Teaching and worshiping are the church's two most basic activities when it assembles, and yet Scripture contains few if any specific rules or methods for them (3:16). Once again, grace and responsibility go together - by no means do we have a license to do as we please, but neither can we hide behind strict rules to structure what we do together. We each have a responsibility to "make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Romans 14:19), for this attitude is more important than knowing the latest methods or reading the latest best-sellers.

So when we learn together - whether a particular individual is teaching or listening - it is important to "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly", so that our teaching and our thoughts are truly based on the message of the gospel, instead of on human knowledge, methods, or desires. Whenever we can set aside what we desire to 'get' or expect to 'get' out of studying the Scripture, then the Word of God itself can overcome any lack of human ability or expertise.

In singing together, too, the word of Christ and the peace of Christ play an important role. The apostle's exhortation here is neither a doctrinal formula* nor a liturgical instruction**, but rather a spiritual reminder of the importance of worshiping together. Singing, in particular, is neither a performance for entertainment purposes nor a legal requirement - it is meant to be a genuine expression of praise to God. Its primary value to us is in edifying our souls, by keeping us humble and by reminding us of the presence of God as he hears our praises.

* This verse neither supports nor bans the use of musical instruments. Though numerous commentators try to interpret Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 so as to make them support one side or another in that debate, using either verse for such a purpose is inherently inappropriate - neither is set in such a context.

** In particular, there is no intended significance to the separate mention of 'psalms', 'hymns', and 'spiritual songs'. Although these do mean slightly different things, a forensic analysis of the terms is again inappropriate in view of the context of the verse.

And "whatever you do", we are reminded to keep Jesus in mind (3:17). This does not mean that God has a specific design or plan for every little action in our lives - rather, it reminds us to live with the memory of the name of Jesus and the awareness of the presence of Jesus, even when what we are doing has little apparent spiritual significance in itself.

As Colossians continues, Paul will provide us with some further applications of these ideas.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why is peace central to Jesus' kind of Lordship? What does Jesus mean by peace? Will it ever differ from the way we usually think of peace? How should this influence our teaching, learning, and worship? What does it mean to do something "in the name of Jesus"? Is this always possible?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Ten: Whatever You Do (Colossians 3:18-4:1)

The gospel calls each believer to put on a new self, because the cross and the empty tomb make us all truly equal before God. In this passage, the apostle outlines just a few of the ways that our social interactions, relationships, and daily affairs can be transformed by the gospel. Yet these are hardly mere rules or methods - they convey a deeper message of renewal and life.

Recently In Colossians - Made New (Colossians 2:16-3:17)

The gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection brings about a complete transformation in all who believe it and fully accept its powerful teachings. When believers allow themselves to die with Christ and then to be raised with him, God can then draw us to him by grace rather than by law. This also confers responsibility on us - the responsibility to live in accordance with the truth.

Since we died with Christ, we do not need to seek God using rules or laws, since law was nailed to the cross along with sin (2:16-23). And since we were raised with Christ, we do not have to serve our fleshly desires either, for self joined sin and law in being nailed to the cross (3:1-10). We now seek God by his grace - and his outpouring of grace also brings spiritual responsibility.

Christ is all ("Christ, who is your life"), and he lives in all who believe in him (3:11-17). The gospel can make everything new. The forgiveness of sins gives us new life, free from having to pay the price for our sins. We have a new identity, defined only by our oneness with Jesus. We become part of a new community, as the new identity breaks down the world's social and economic barriers; and are each dressed with new clothes made from fruits of the Spirit.

Male & Female He Created Them (Colossians 3:18-19)

As soon as sin entered the world, human beings became separated from God, separated from each other, and separated from nature. The gospel's grace, truth, and power allow us to overcome the tensions, rivalries, and misunderstandings inherent to worldly relationships. This is even true in the ever-mystifying relations between males and females.

These charges to wives and husbands - and more generally to women and men* - are often misinterpreted (3:18-19). Whatever these verses are telling us to do, it is because it is "fitting in the Lord", not because it is the social norm**. Another clue is the overall train of thought in Colossians: since the apostle has gone to considerable lengths to teach us not to rely on laws and rules to serve God, it makes little sense that he would suddenly make a few rules of his own.

* Although all of the major versions translate the verse as applying specifically to husbands and wives, the original text simply reads, "women, honor the men ... men, love the women".

** The practices of the early Christians defied the norms of the time, in that public Christian worship and ministry involved men and women being together, which was contrary to most other religions of the era.

The apostle's thoughts (here and also in Ephesians 5) can be better understood by a look at the original fall of humanity and the resulting "curse" (Genesis 3:16-17). The truest and greatest loss from "The Fall" was the loss of God's immediate presence. Sin always causes separation - and

this is the essence of God's statements to Eve and Adam. "Your iniquities have separated you from your God" (Isaiah 59:2), for "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

Since the fall, humanity has been separated from God, and this separation in turn causes other hardships. In his statements after the Fall, God is not issuing 'punishment' so much as explaining the way that things will be now that they cannot live in his full protection. All sin has natural consequences, which is why God warns us not to sin. After the fall, the world became a harsher and less forgiving place - and among the hardships was the toxin of dysfunctional relationships.

God's sad words to the husband and wife foretell what worldly relations between male and female would become, very much contrary to God's own design under which "male and female he created them" and "they will become one flesh". After the Fall, relationships became a competition rather than a union. The woman henceforth will "desire to have" her husband - not at all meaning an attraction to him, but rather a wish to control and manipulate him*, whether by emotions or by some other means. In his turn, the husband will "rule over her" by force.

* The Hebrew verb translated "desire" in Genesis 3:16 is the same verb that God uses in Genesis 4:7, when he is speaking to Cain and he says, "sin desires to have you" - it expresses a will to control and dominate.

God did not desire any of this (and it has nothing to do with the woman eating the fruit first); but now that they have separated themselves from his presence, it will sadly become the case. Even in the book of Genesis itself, some of the most faithful men are completely insensitive to their wives, while some of the most faithful women scheme to deceive and manipulate their husbands.

In Colossians 3, then - as he presents the ways the gospel renews all things - Paul points out how it can transform relationships between women and men, renewing them to make them what they once were (and were always meant to be), changing the two genders back into genuinely mutual helpers and companions. Now, God and the apostle both know that every individual is different; but they also know that the world conditions most persons in some particularly common ways.

The woman's call is to show genuine respect (to honor the man, or be 'submissive', if understood as an attitude and not an outward law*), for the world teaches women how to manipulate men by exploiting the average male's deep insecurities about women - thus many women are outwardly 'submissive' but have no true respect for men. The man is called to show genuine, sensitive love**, for the world conditions men to fixate on accomplishments and tasks - even Christian men can try to substitute displays of status or wealth for the genuine love their wives need.

* The verb in Greek is in the "middle/passive" voice, not the "active" voice.

** And not to become bitter (the NASB's more precise word choice) if and when the woman confuses him.

The truths of the gospel can repair human relationships just as they repair our relationship with God, so that our relations with each other also can return to what God always hoped they would be, and we can all be more like Jesus - provided we both accept the responsibility for heeding God's call, instead of hiding behind rules, methods, or the inadequacies of the other gender.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How did "The Fall" affect human relationships? How does this parallel humanity's relationship with God? How can the gospel reverse these disorders? What do women have to do in order to make this happen? What do men have to do? What differences between us will not change? Which ones should change?

Living In God's Presence - Further Examples (Colossians 3:20-24)

Other kinds of relationships also test our understanding of the gospel and our willingness to live by its truths. Relations between parents and children have never been easy; and in every society there have also been enormous economic inequalities that - amongst their many other toxic effects - have poisoned human relationships. But the gospel can help with these, too.

Generational tensions, between parents and children and between young and old in general, are another perennial feature of relationships in a fallen world (3:20-21). The apostle calls children to please the Lord by doing as their parents tell them*. Paul says elsewhere that to, "honor your father and mother" is the "first commandment with a promise" (Ephesians 6:2). Parents (fathers) are in turn called to be gentle, and not to provoke or exasperate their children. Children exist for their own sake, not merely for the convenience or satisfaction of their parents.

* This time, the Greek verb is in the active voice, calling for an outward action. This differentiates the nature of the call to children from the exhortation to women in verse 18 above.

There are also broader parallels to consider. As adults, younger persons should not be required outwardly to obey everything they are told by someone older; but they can and should learn to show more respect for previous generations who have seen a lot more of life, instead of listening only to those of their own age. Older believers should remember their own youthful follies, and thus show gentle understanding of the young, even as we call them to become more mature.

The gospel also calls us to serve in complete sincerity, whether in ministry or in secular settings, without the cold calculations that the worldly make when determining how much effort to put into something (3:22-24). Note that this passage deals only indirectly with the attitudes of Christians towards inequalities and injustices, for in the New Testament believers are called to direct attention to such things and to help those victimized by them, yet not to change outward conditions by force*, instead seeking change by example and by making our own sacrifices.

* The Scriptures never legitimize holding slaves (literally, bond-servants); they acknowledge it as a sad fact of worldly affairs, and advise us on how to withstand the existence of such evils without giving in to hate or violence. In Philemon (written to a resident of Colosse), Paul appeals to Philemon to recognize his 'slave' Onesimus as a fully equal brother. Not only should Philemon not punish Onesimus for running away, but he also should consider freeing him. Compare also the New Testament's call for believers to be good citizens, despite the rampant corruption and violence endemic to the governments of the era.

It is human nature to exert oneself only when the eyes of others are upon us*, so that we can receive some kind of credit, whether tangible or intangible. The apostle calls us to serve from the heart and to take spiritual encouragement from knowing that God is aware of everything we do and endure - in this sense we all are "working for the Lord". Certainly, if even slaves unjustly forced to work for the benefit of others are still called still to work diligently, then certainly those of us whose job situations are far more favorable (if often empty or tedious) can do the same.

* Literally, the Greek text of verse 22 tells us not to give "eyeservice", a term Paul seems to have invented.

The gospel both calls us and enables us to develop a new and purer motivation for life, work, and ministry, no longer exerting ourselves grudgingly or only in the hopes of rewards or results. Here too, the gospel repairs the damage done from the Fall - instead of being 'cursed' to toil laboriously to fulfill our basic earthly needs, we can now do everything as if we were "working

for the Lord", with an awareness that there is a dimension to our efforts that transcends the mundane or even unjust aspects of the earthly tasks we must engage in.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What perspective best helps us understand Paul's exhortations to slaves? In what ways can all believers apply his advice? What does it mean to be "working for the Lord"? How does it 'reverse the curse' from the Fall?

No Favoritism (Colossians 3:25-4:1)

Christians should not deny that the world is full of unfairness and inequality, yet we should also never forget that before God we are all truly equal. In this life we must endure the uneven dispersal of the world's prizes, though at times we also may benefit from inequality. But we all must never forget that God pursues a different, higher, and more powerful form of justice.

Knowing that he has given advice that can easily be explained away or even misused, Paul cautions us that there is always a spiritual connection between sowing and reaping, even when worldly results seem to reward sinfulness (3:25). Although even believers often look only for the outward results or effects of their decisions, Scripture often reminds us that there are spiritual consequences to our earthly actions. As believers, we are called to act like Jesus and think like Jesus - to gauge our actions and thoughts by him, not by what they 'accomplish' outwardly.

Paul emphasizes that there is no favoritism, even for Christians - just because we are serving diligently or ministering effectively does not mean that we are allowed to take liberties in the ways we treat others. "The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them ... not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave." (Matthew 20:25-27). Nor should we show favoritism to others because of their worldly status, even if human logic can justify it (see James 2:1-11).

Any believer who has any kind of power or influence must be especially wise about the use and misuse of earthly authority (4:1). Even Christians can be too pre-occupied with the activities of our earthly 'lords' (or "masters"*) to remember that the real Lord is truly all-powerful. Christians are just as likely as atheists to mistake God's patience for a lack of concern with the world's ills. We know that there is eternal justice, and we ought to live as if we really believed it.

* Though usually translated "masters/master", the word in both verses 1 and 2 is the word κυριος ("kurios"), frequently used of Jesus and in that context usually translated "Lord".

So again, we see how grace and responsibility go together. Rules, methods, and traditions keep us all in an immature state, but grace calls us higher. Instead of being motivated by results and accomplishments, and instead of being motivated by feelings and emotional satisfaction, we can learn to live as Jesus did and to think as Jesus thought. There is no favoritism in this way of living, for it is equally difficult for male and female, young and old, rich and poor.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does God mean by 'favoritism'? Why does Paul warn about it here? In what ways do Christians often fall into favoritism? Does this passage help us to avoid it, or just to know how to address it when it occurs?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Eleven: Proclaiming The Mystery (Colossians 4:2-6)

In Colossians, Paul describes the gospel as a "mystery". The cross and the empty tomb proclaim truths that transcend time and place, and that render trivial even the deepest of human philosophies. The gospel can also affect every area of our lives. Now, the apostle is going to discuss some ideas on how even we mortals can proclaim this mystery, in word and in deed.

Previously In Colossians (Colossians 3:11-4:1)

Because Jesus is our life, he makes everything about us new, once we allow the truths of the gospel to transform us. Whatever we do can be done in the awareness of God's presence and also in the security that comes from living in his grace. Earthly relationships and earthly responsibilities can return to the pure state they once held before sin caused the fall of humanity.

Christ is all, and is in all of us (3:11-17); so he can renew everything that matters. He gives each of us a new life free from the weight of our past, with a new identity based on him and not our worldly status. We can become part of a new community with no worldly barriers. And each of us can be dressed in new clothes, the fruits of the Spirit, made visible to others.

Whatever we do can be transformed by the gospel (3:18-4:1). With both sin and self nailed to the cross, we can live in God's presence, as humans did before the Fall. "Male and female he created them", intending them to be companions and helpers; but that was ruined by sin. The gospel imposes no rules on marriages or relationships - rather, it teaches us to heal the wounds caused by sin, by challenging both men and women to rise above their flesh. Likewise, we can fulfill all our earthly responsibilities in a new way, no longer subject to the curse of the Fall, but doing everything for our Lord. God's presence renews lives in practice, not merely in theory.

Devotion To Prayer (Colossians 4:2)

Prayer is such a familiar topic that it is easy to take it for granted, allowing it to become a mere formality or even a superstition. Yet with only a little adjustment to our perspective, prayer can become a way of life, a part of our relationship with God that naturally and seamlessly helps us in other areas of life, but even more: a way of transcending the routines of our lives here.

We can make the best use of the gift of prayer by being both watchful and thankful (4:2). Being devoted to prayer means making it much more than a ritual or a method. When we truly understand that God's presence is near, prayer is simply a natural acknowledgement of his closeness. If God is actually with us, then why not simply tell him when we are anxious? Why not ask at once him when we need help with something? Why not immediately ask his advice when we need wisdom? This is how we can "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

When we treat prayer as a mere activity or seek simplistic methods for prayer, we miss its real purpose: prayer is a point of contact between each of us and the spiritual realm. Communication and fellowship (in its truest sense) matter even more than the asking and granting of requests.

Prayer connects us both with God and with other believers. We all have the same God, whose transcendent nature allows him to be near each of us at all times and to hear any number of prayers, even if they are offered at the same point in human time*. The closer we each get to

God, the closer we get to each other. The more that each of us becomes aware of God's presence, the more we truly engage with one another's presence on a non-trivial level.

* God's transcendent nature - not limited by our time and space - explains many of his abilities and qualities that otherwise seem impossible. He is able to see everything in our world at once because it is in a lower "dimension" than his, in the same way that we can see everything on a map or piece of paper at once.

Prayer also connects us with other times and places. Since Creation, God has always sought the same thing from his people: that they might know him and live in his presence, that he might have a genuine relationship or interaction with them. And every human has the same need to know God implanted in his or her soul. When we speak with God in awareness of his presence, we also become one with believers across the centuries who by grace have had fellowship with him. Moreover, we become aware of the depth of the spiritual needs both in us and around us.

Thankful prayer thus means much more than verbally giving God credit for the things he has done for us (that is, for the tiny fraction of them that we even notice). A humble awareness of God's presence, which prayer itself can enhance, helps us also to realize how blessed we are simply to know God and to be able to speak with him any time we wish to.

The other quality Paul mentions - watchfulness* - may at first seem less connected to prayer. Yet watchfulness is an essential aspect of knowing God. "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back ... What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'" (Mark 13:35, 37). Christians are called to be alert, not complacent - not anxious about the hazards of life in this world, but well aware of the spiritual dangers that we and others face.

* The expression in the original text implies wakefulness, and was most frequently used in regards to guard duty - for example, in Mark 14:34 and 14:37. The NASB translates the expression as "keeping alert".

As we develop a genuine relationship with God, we are made constantly aware of the paradox of our lives here: spiritual beings belonging to a spiritual God, yet for a time encased in physical bodies inhabiting a physical universe. We should be watchful in several respects. The world constantly tempts us to turn to their shallow perspectives, and they are more aggressive than God is - prayer is our best antidote to this. In prayer we can make a living connection with the nature and presence of God, which gives us what we need to stay on the narrow path that leads to life.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does it mean to be devoted to prayer? Does it refer to an amount of time, or something else? How does it help us to know God? What makes a prayer truly thankful? How should we be "watchful" in prayer?

Opening The Door (Colossians 4:3-4)

Just as the nature of the gospel teaches us that we can come to God only by grace, not by our works or knowledge, so also the nature of gospel ministry is such that we cannot force the door open to give ourselves opportunities to proclaim the truth. Genuine chances for gospel ministry come not by our self-will, but only through God graciously opening the door for us.

All believers, regardless of other differences or similarities, carry a special message that can meet the deepest needs of every human (4:3). Yet if this becomes a duty or an obligation, we contradict the very message of grace. And if we turn it into an activity or a competition, we distort the very nature of the cross and the empty tomb. We are called instead to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2), so that mystery of the gospel is seen in us.

Praying for opportunities is hardly a matter of motivation or of trying to prove ourselves. By keeping a thankful, watchful connection with God - continually making contact with the eternal Creator and his living creations - we see an infinity of opportunities to share God's grace, by action or by word. What Paul advises us to pray for is for God to open the door. Paul knows from his own experience that we cannot force the door open* - all we can do is to be ready and willing to share God's grace, humbly allowing God to show us the most suitable places to do so.

* Consider, for example, Acts 16:6-10, when Paul himself at least twice tried to travel to a region other than where God wanted him to go, before finally realizing that God was sending him to Macedonia.

When we do find an open door*, we are called to communicate the gospel itself, not our church with its programs and doctrines. Paul again refers to the gospel's "mysterious**" nature, to remind us that it is not a set of instructions or laws but a personal communication, an invitation, not to an earthly organization but to the entrance to heaven itself. When we see the gospel in this way, it changes both our attitudes in speaking to others and the content of what we say to them.

* Compare some of these other passages that use the same image: Acts 14:27, 1 Corinthians 16:9, 2 Corinthians 2:12, Revelation 3:8. Consider also whether there is a connection with passages like Matthew 7:7-8, Luke 12:36, and Revelation 3:20, which use the "door" image with a somewhat different emphasis.

** See also Colossians 1:26-27, Colossians 2:2, and the previous notes to those verses.

Paul accepted chains and beatings not because he sought to build up an earthly organization, but because he strove to introduce human souls to the glory and security of knowing God. If we too remember this, then we can minister with patience and sincerity, without false urgency or ulterior motives. Every soul is different, and will follow its own path to its God. God does not care what congregation or preacher gets 'credit' for a soul, just that the soul gets its sins forgiven.

God calls us to carry and proclaim a clear message, a gospel that truly is good news (4:4). He even asks for prayers that he himself can clearly proclaim an uncluttered gospel that knows "nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Even the great apostle knows how easy it is to inject our personal hobby-horses and agendas into our message, and how easy it is for us to crave results and thus subtly alter our message to try to obtain them.

Keeping Jesus as the center of everything is as it should be, and it is in keeping with everything Paul has emphasized throughout the book of Colossians. Note that Paul often discusses his personal experiences and uses them to illustrate spiritual lessons, but he also calls himself "the worst of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:16), and he does not use his personal opinions or habits as a standard for others - he knows that they should follow Christ, not Paul.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What is an "open door"? Why do we have to allow God to open it? Is the image used differently in some verses (see the note above for examples)? Why does our message have to be clear? What does this imply? In what sense are we proclaiming a "mystery"? How should this affect what we say and teach?

Grace & Salt (Colossians 4:5-6)

Grace always comes with responsibility, and spiritual opportunities always bring earthly risks. Many believers find it difficult to proclaim the truth with the grace, sincerity, and compassion that Jesus exemplified. Other believers have these qualities, but are too eager to please humans and thus proclaim a shallow, generic message without including challenging but important truths.

To be wise in action calls us to look beyond our search for methods and tactical tricks, and instead once again to develop a deeper awareness of God's presence (4:5). Paul makes special mention of the way we act towards the "outsiders*", those outside of the body of Jesus, because he knows how easily impressions can be formed, for good or for ill, fairly or unfairly. In such interactions, wisdom, patience and grace almost always matter more than methodology or zeal.

* The original text simply says, "Walk in wisdom towards the (ones) outside"

To make the most of every opportunity does not at all mean that we should anxiously take everything an unbeliever should know and try to cram it into one conversation. Literally, the text simply says to, "redeem the time", that is, to make it count for something. Our insecure preoccupation with results just gets in the way of any genuine evangelistic (good news) efforts. Some plant the seed, some water it, some give it a little light, some get to enjoy watching it sprout. Who does which matters little to God, and it should matter to us less than it does.

Wisdom in speaking is shown both in what we say and in how we say it (4:6). In themselves, both truth and lies can be stated either pleasantly or harshly. Paul's simple description of "grace seasoned with salt" gives us a clear idea of how we are called to speak about Jesus - and indeed this describes the way that our Savior himself spoke when he was here on our earth.

Any speech about Jesus should be full of grace because that is the only way to represent Jesus fairly. While we hope that listeners will come to believe in him, and that they will make changes because of his words, all such results are meaningless (or worse) unless they are brought about through grace. Paul has explained at length in Colossians that rules, laws, and competitions produce only outward results, and can never make the inner changes that God really desires.

Yet our speech should also be seasoned with "salt*", not superficial or meaningless. The gospel has some unsettling implications, and a truly caring believer will not avoid the ways that Jesus calls us to give up false security and short-term comfort in order both to see the truth more clearly ourselves and also to give genuine help, not simplistic slogans, to others seeking God.

* This expression was a familiar one in ancient Greek writings. Writers could call a book or an oration "unsalted" if it was filled with platitudes and vague generalities instead of calling for thoughtful consideration of important issues. Jesus, of course, used the image of salt in its role of a preservative in Matthew 5:13; and this connects with what Paul says here - the world does not need fine-sounding words or shallow methods, but rather needs to address its true problems openly and honestly.

For we are not called to spend our Christian lives in what one commentator calls a "holy huddle", endlessly giving one another excuses to avoid dealing with the troubling questions of life, God, and Christianity. We are called instead to answer everyone - "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience" (1 Peter 3:15-16). The grace of genuine compassion seasoned with the salt of pure truth is always what others need.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does an awareness of God's presence affect the ways we deal with others? Does it affect our interactions with believers differently from interactions with unbelievers? Why are grace and 'salt' both necessary in our speech? How does the role of 'salt' as truthfulness connect with the role of 'salt' as a preservative?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2013*

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SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS

Notes For Week Twelve: Everything That Is Happening (Colossians 4:7-18)

As Paul concludes his epistle to the Colossians, he passes along some personal thoughts that bring out how multifaceted Christian ministry can be. There are seeking souls near and far, with a wide range of needs both spiritual and physical. And the world itself will never stop generating a wide variety of events and distractions. What perspective should a Christian have?

Review & Summary Of Colossians

The young Colossian church was struggling because of outside teachers who were promoting arbitrary rules and speculative theologies. So the apostle has discussed in detail the true nature of the gospel of grace; and he has pointed out the most significant ways that the genuine gospel transforms us naturally, without the need for human-made expedients.

Instead of a point-by-point critique of these false teachings, Paul focuses first of all on the riches and blessings of the gospel (Colossians 1). The basic truths of the crucifixion and resurrection provide us with everything we need to be completely forgiven of sins and to live in God's presence - without any further human-made supplements, either theological or methodological.

He then addresses the problems in Colosse, but not by forensic arguments - rather, by pointing out spiritual truths (Colossians 2). Salvation by grace is at the heart of the gospel, and the accusing power of the law was nailed to the cross - so rules, no matter how wise they may seem, cannot reflect the true nature of the gospel. And the cross teaches us that we are truly equal in God's sight, so that no genuine gospel teaching will ever exalt one type of person over another.

A resurrected perspective on our lives begins with realizing that with grace comes responsibility (Colossians 3:1-17). Self was nailed to the cross along with sin and law, which means that we have the spiritual wisdom and power that we need in order to live for things above, not for earthly things. God trusts us to work this out in practice without imposing any arbitrary laws.

The gospel of grace comes with personal responsibilities, and there will always be personal news about other souls for us to keep in mind (Colossians 3:18-4:18). In Christ there are no laws - "everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial". The gospel calls each of us to rise above our fleshly nature, but God does not force any of us to do anything. We can help each other by sharing what we have learned about God, and speaking with grace "seasoned with salt".

It's A Complicated World (Colossians 4:7-9)

The gospel teaches us that every soul matters to all the others. Yet at the same time, the truths of the gospel remind us of how large and complicated this world can be. Paul's personal comments encourage us to keep both of these principles in mind. Ideally, a believer should be focused on meeting needs immediately in view, without losing sight of the larger, eternal picture.

Paul has sent his letter to the Colossians via personal messengers who have an additional goal, for they travel with the "express purpose" (NIV) of exchanging personal news between Colosse and Rome (4:7-8). Paul's description of Tychicus provides us with a good perspective on our Christian relationships in general: Tychicus is a "dear brother", of whom Paul is personally fond;

yet he is also a "fellow servant" and a "faithful minister*". Christian relationships are meant to have this extra dimension that worldly friendships do not have. We do well to remember that the brothers and sisters whom we love are also called, like us, to reflect the glory of Jesus in all things. Jesus said that we, "are not of the world any more than I am of the world" (John 17:14).

* Tychicus is also mentioned in Acts 20:4, Ephesians 6:21, and Titus 3:12. Paul often used him as a messenger, while at other times he accompanied Paul on some of his mission trips.

The apostle's messengers regularly exchange information* and encouragement between him and the many Christians he knows elsewhere. So even in prison he can, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). When other believers are blessed, we can share in their joy, since we belong to the same body. When another believer is disheartened, we are to "strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way" (Isaiah 35:3).

* The text of verse 8 is ambiguous as to whether Tychicus is passing along information about Paul to the Colossians, or gathering news about the Colossians to report to Paul, or both - but it does not particularly matter, since the thrust of the passage is the value of sharing news in both directions.

The nature of the gospel calls us towards a broader awareness of the lives of others - not in terms of the daily trivia of earthly existence, but in terms of one another's knowledge of God and spiritual needs (4:9). Onesimus, who is travelling with Tychicus, will help share Paul's personal news with the Colossians - but he has his own interesting story to tell, only hinted at here.

As the book of Philemon tells us, Onesimus was the slave of Philemon, a prosperous member of the Colossian church. Seeking freedom, Onesimus ran away and ended up in Rome, where he met Paul, at some point becoming a Christian. So Paul wrote to Philemon* on behalf of his new friend, asking Philemon to re-evaluate his relationship with his new brother, and to refrain from punishing him - and openly hinting that he would do well to make Onesimus fully free. This is yet another reminder of the unknown dramas that so often lie behind the faces we see around us.

* It is likely that the personal letter to Philemon was delivered along with Colossians (and most likely other correspondence, such as Paul's letter to Laodicea). If so, this is a fascinating display of grace on Paul's part, trusting Onesimus to return to his "master" with only a polite request to excuse his absence. And it shows considerable faith on the part of Onesimus, who trusted in God's will enough to risk his personal freedom.

Expanding our awareness of others can never be a method, nor does it promise any specific results. Yet it is not meant as a burdensome obligation, for it is just a natural consequence of understanding the gospel itself. We do not have to force ourselves to do things for others if we simply get into the healthy habit of paying attention to those around us while allowing the grace of the gospel to guide our perspectives and to transform us without using methods or gimmicks.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: How does Paul's description of Tychicus apply to all Christian relationships? What can we learn and apply from Onesimus's situation? What overall lessons can we learn from Paul's interactions with these two believers?

The Family Of Believers (Colossians 4:10-15)

Even though Paul was constantly beset by anxieties, problems, and persecution, he always kept in mind the personal spiritual histories of each believer whom he had met over the course of his ministry. His perspective combines a deep awareness of the majesty of God's grand design in Christ with a highly sensitive awareness of the many individual souls who are seeking God.

When Paul passes along personal greetings from Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus, he again reminds us of the multi-dimensional nature of Christian relationships (4:10-11). Aristarchus*, like the apostle, is a prisoner, while the other two are apparently doing what they can to comfort their brothers while they are in chains. And a couple other details are worth noticing as well.

* Aristarchus was a frequent travelling companion of Paul's (Acts 20:4, 19:29, 27:2); and he had faced danger before, having been attacked by the rioters in Ephesus (Acts 19:28-29).

Paul mentions that these are the only three Jewish believers in Jesus who are currently with him, since Paul always had a special desire for his fellow Jews to know the Messiah. Like all of us, the apostle knew the value of every soul, but could not help being especially encouraged by the conversions of those he could particularly relate to. We also notice his warm remarks about Barnabas's cousin Mark, whom he once had declared unfit for mission work (Acts 15:37-40), but whom he now appreciates as a valuable fellow servant (see also 2 Timothy 4:11).

Another greeting reminds us of the valuable but uncelebrated ministry of Epaphras (4:12-13). Paul calls him a faithful servant who "agonizes" (or "wrestles") in prayer for those he cares about. Besides founding the church at Colosse, Epaphras also had ministries in Laodicea and Hierapolis*, and possibly founded the churches there as well - only to find himself discredited by the newer, more aggressive group of self-promoting teachers who were leading the Colossians astray. Yet his work was honored by Paul and was certainly appreciated by Jesus and his Father.

* See the notes for Week One (Colossians 1:1-7) for more on these cities, the churches there, and Epaphras.

Paul's other greetings to and from dear friends include names familiar and obscure (4:14-15). We know all about Luke, yet Nympha* was clearly just as devoted to Jesus, allowing her home to be used for congregational assemblies*, reminding us of the many souls in every era who give everything they can to seeking and serving God without concern for personal glory or reward.

* The wording of the text makes it likely that Nympha lived in Laodicea, rather than Colosse. Note that the KJV translators, relying on more limited manuscript evidence, identify her as a male named Nymphas.

Close relationships can bring both joy and sorrow - sometimes even more so in Jesus. It is a joy to have friends to share our lives with, and much more so when we share in seeking and serving Jesus together. Yet there are also friends who were once close, but who have turned away from us - and this can be even more painful in Jesus because of the spiritual implications.

Demas is one of the friends to whom Paul sends joyful greetings. But only a few years later he turned away from the path of truth: "Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:10, written as Paul was awaiting execution). Even the great apostle had relationships like this; even he could not force a dear friend to act against his own free will. Such cases are a source of sorrow, yet they do not mean that we have done anything wrong ourselves.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Paul mention that three of his companions are Jewish Christians? Why isn't Epaphras more widely remembered? What can we learn from this? What can we learn from the others Paul mentions in his greetings?

Completing The Work (Colossians 4:16-18)

As mortal believers, we shall never see the true fulfillment of what God is doing until we go home to be with him. Yet in another sense we can find a completion, even a form of perfection, in our ministry. This is not a matter of obtaining results or even attaining a level of personal development, but rather is a matter of accepting once for all an eternal, spiritual perspective.

Paul encourages the Colossians to share their spiritual news with the Christians in nearby Laodicea (4:16). Paul has recently written to the Laodiceans as well*, and he asks that the letters be exchanged. Whatever subjects the apostle addresses in his letters, he is always aware that the spiritual principles involved will apply well beyond the details of the immediate situation. This is yet another small reminder of grace and responsibility, for he implicitly encourages all of us to look beyond our immediate concerns in order to focus on things that will matter forever.

* Unfortunately, we can no longer know what was written in his letter to the Laodiceans.

Paul's closing words remind us of both the personal and the eternal (4:17-18). His final personal message is an exhortation to another believer, Archippus, to complete the work the Lord has given him to do. We cannot know whether this refers to a particular task that Jesus has given to Archippus, or whether it is a general exhortation about ministry. Nor do we know much else about Archippus except Paul's statement in Philemon 1:2* that he is a 'fellow soldier', suggesting someone particularly willing to undergo hardships for the sake of the gospel.

* The letter known as Philemon is actually addressed to three individuals: Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus, often assumed to be husband, wife, and son, or sometimes husband, wife, and (head?) servant.

Yet none of this matters as much as the link between grace and responsibility that arises once again. The apostle explicitly mentions that Archippus was given a ministry by grace, and then reminds him of his responsibility to fulfill it. His example reminds us to keep our minds completely open to God's will, since the ministry God gives us may not promise the results we desire. Like Archippus, we should simply open our hearts to whatever door God opens for us.

Paul's own example, and his eagerness to personalize his farewell*, remind us of all the needs that constantly fill this world. We cannot possibly fill them all, nor should we try - instead, it is merely a reminder to find ways in which by grace we can share a little of Jesus with others. Paul has endured chains and numerous other hardships for the sake of knowing Jesus and sharing Jesus with others. He is inspired by a vision, not compelled by law or motivated by a program.

* Paul generally did not write out his letters personally, but relied on the type of professional scribe that was very common in the days before the printing press. At the very end, he would take the pen in his own hand to write the final greeting, to emphasize his personal connection - see 2 Thessalonians 3:17.

Each believer receives a ministry, and our responsibilities will always differ. Paul tells us that human rules, conformity, manipulation, and fanaticism are all alien to the nature of the gospel. Jesus neither needs nor wants fanatics who try to force others to adopt their views or ways. Jesus seeks souls inspired by the message of grace to find doors that God has opened, and to share what Jesus has done without worrying about earthly results or rewards. As with the widow who gave God her two small coins, he is filled with joy whenever we simply give him what we can.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Why does Paul want the Colossians to exchange letters with the Laodiceans? What can we learn from this? How can we learn from Archippus's example even without knowing his specific responsibilities? What overall lessons do we learn from Paul's words and perspectives in this epistle?

- *Mark Garner, Northland Church Of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 2013*

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