

New Testament Survey

Lesson 29

Paul's Letter to Colossians

This year at Thanksgiving, we had 14 family members on a single long table. We were blessed to have three of our five children, both my sisters and their husbands, four of their combined six children, and my mom. Mom sat at one end of the table, and I sat at the other.

After we all filled our plates and sat to begin eating, Mom directed our table conversation. She said she would like each of us to tell a story about someone in the family who is no longer with us, and the lesson that we learned from the stories. Mom began with a stirring and funny story about her grandmother that left us all commenting there was no point in anyone following her.

Everyone did follow however, and the amazing thing is that everyone's stories, young and old had just as much moving power. I think that is a reflection of the power of story and advice. We got snapshots of things that had happened, from people that are no longer with us, in ways that teach lessons and give direction. That the story subjects have passed from this earth, added a dimension of heart to everything said.

Later that evening, Mom and two of our children sat for quite a while discussing death. One daughter is in her twenties, and one in the midst of the teenage years, while mom is, of course, older. It is sobering to consider that our time on earth passes.

There is wisdom in seeing that earthly life has its limits. The Psalmist prayed, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). As we understand that life is not TIVO or a DVD -- it does not have a rewind button, or even a pause button -- we reach a point of focusing on today, on the moment. Many people staring at death through the eyes of a terminal illness emphasize the place of appreciating and caring for each day.

Consider how that might apply to Paul in his Roman imprisonment. Paul's life was in danger from the courts, but in truth, Paul's life had been in danger many times before. Paul was not afraid of dying, but he was conscious of the need to maximize each moment of life. From his Roman incarceration, Paul wrote, "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time" in Colossians 4:5. This was Paul at his finest, "making the best use of the time," and he set it out in theology as well as instructions on practical living in his letter that we consider today.

COLOSSIANS

The church at Colossae is new to us in our New Testament survey. We know from Colossians 2:1 that Paul had neither started the congregation, nor had he visited it.

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face (Col. 2:1).

We surmise that Paul's knowledge of the church there came from Epaphras, a missionary Paul knew while in Rome, which is where Paul was when Luke concluded his history we call "Acts."

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith...just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf... Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers (Col. 1:3-7; 4:12)

Paul likely sent this letter with Tychicus at the time Tychicus was taking Ephesians¹ to the churches around Ephesus. We can see evidence of this in both letters.

Tychicus will tell you all about my activities... (Col. 4:7)

So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything (Eph. 6:21).



This also makes sense because the most direct way from Rome to Colossae would go into the port at Ephesus first and then journey up the Maeander River valley 120 miles to Colossae.

¹ Ephesians and Colossians have a number of thoughts in common and are called by some scholars "the twin epistles"

What we know about Colossae and its issues we have to glean from Paul's letter. Like listening to one side of a telephone conversation, we are able to discern some of the issues Paul was confronting, while some remain cloaked in mystery and ambiguity. Even where we are unsure of the issues that prompted Paul's writing, we are still able to appreciate what Paul had to say. That is one of the beauties of Paul's epistles that are saved in Holy Scripture.

Chapter 1

Paul began his letter setting out his authority as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, adding that Timothy was a co-writer. This would be especially important in writing to a church he had not started or visited. In spite of his physical absence from the church, Paul was not without caring, as evidenced by his continual prayers on their behalf. His prayers expressed thanksgiving to God for the faith in the church and the love that the church had for the saints everywhere. Paul knew that their faith and love stemmed from the blessing they could be certain was laid up for eternity in God's presence. That future promise bore its fruit in the present as faith grew among the believers. Paul knew this from Epaphras, who had taught the church in Colossae, and had informed Paul of the ways God had worked in their lives.

Paul prayed not only thanksgiving for the Colossians, but he also petitioned God on their behalf. Paul wanted God to fill them with the

knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (Col. 1:9-10).

Paul wanted to see the church bear fruit in good works as they grew in their knowledge of God. For Paul, growing in knowledge of God was growing in intimacy with him, and that resulted in greater works on God's behalf.

For this, Paul wanted the Colossians strengthened in their walks with God's power. God's power would bring God glory while it grew in the Colossians' endurance and patience with joy. Paul explained that endurance, patience, and joy flow from God's power in multiple ways. God's power qualifies us to share in the inheritance of eternity with the saints. His power also delivers us from the reign of darkness into the Son's kingdom. God does this by redeeming us and forgiving our sins in Jesus.

After praying for the Colossians, Paul began discussing the wonders of Christ. I always enjoy reading this from Paul as he had earlier in life worked so hard against Jesus, tried to destroy Jesus' followers, and challenged the idea that this humble carpenter from the backwoods was Messiah. (It is still startling to think that all of this had happened within less time than I have been a lawyer or than my son has been alive. Think of the last 25-30 years and realize that such was the time that had passed since the death of the carpenter Jesus and this letter). But after meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was converted in heart and

mind. Then, Paul read scriptures with clarity as spiritual scales fell from his eyes. Over the 25 to 30 years since, Paul had many opportunities to work through the scriptures with Jews, to work through philosophies with Gentiles, and to work through the implications of the Lord Jesus with others in the church.

This letter is extremely Christ-centered. Paul's voice speaks clearly from the ink as we read what Paul had to say of Jesus:

Jesus

- The image of the invisible God
- The Firstborn of all creation
- Who created all things
- Through whom all things were created
- For whom all things were created
- Before all things
- Holds all things together
- The head of the church (the body)
- The beginning
- The firstborn from the dead
- Preeminent in all things
- In whom the fullness of God dwelt
- Through whom all things are reconciled

Jesus, in all these ways/roles, has changed who believers are, what believers do, and where believers are headed. Believers were once alienated from God, hostile, and perpetrators of evil. But by his death, Jesus reconciled believers from their past to present them as holy and blameless before God. This directly impacts the believer who continues stable and steadfast in faith. It is for this reconciliation that Paul has spent his life as a minister.

Paul gladly toiled to present this truth. Even as his ministry brought him suffering and physical pain, he gladly endured these problems as fulfilling the role he had in discharging God's plan for him to teach and proclaim the mystery of the ages. This was the mystery of Christ coming into the life of Jewish and Gentile believers as the confident expectation of the coming glory in the age to come. Paul willingly gave all his energy and more, the energy God supplies, to proclaim this truth with necessary warnings as the believers are brought to maturity.

Paul struggled to minister to the Colossians, the Laodiceans, and all the disciples who had not ever actually met him. Paul wanted their hearts encouraged and knitted together in love so that they might reach the riches of full assurance of knowing and understanding Christ, God's mystery revealed. In Christ are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and Paul wanted the Colossians to know that. They should never accept the delusions of those who teach anything to the contrary. No knowledge or mysteries are found beyond what is revealed and found in Jesus Christ. That is the faith that Paul rejoiced to find the church standing firmly upon.

The Colossians were to walk in Jesus as Lord. They started their Christian life, and it took root in the recognition and acknowledgement of Jesus' lordship. Paul encouraged them not to change their position on that issue as their life continued.

The depths of knowledge and wonders of life are found in Jesus, not in human tradition or philosophy that deceitfully seems to offer something beyond the revelation of Christ. Think about it: In Jesus Christ, ***God's fullness dwells***. The ***believer has this same Jesus filling him/her***, as Jesus is the head and authority of the body. Why would anyone turn to another philosophy for answers? Who has more depth or answers than God in his fullness?

God has taken the believer and marked him, just as circumcision marked the Jews. But God's mark on the believer is beyond something done by human hands. When the believer was immersed,² the believer was buried with Jesus. God's power that resurrected Jesus was at work in the believer as the believer was raised from the immersion by faith. God made alive one who was previously dead in his/her sins or trespasses. God forgave the believer his/her sins. In a legal sense, God cancelled the debt tied to sin, nailing it to the cross, and disarming the adversary/accuser through the victory of the cross.

This is why the Colossians need not let another pass any judgment on them in regard to rules of religious ritual that were simply in place to foreshadow the coming Messiah and his reign. Issues like what food or drink is acceptable (laws of kosher diet), maintaining the Jewish festivals, even keeping Sabbath – these were no longer marks of greater spirituality. Similarly, outside the Jewish law itself, practices of denying the body (“asceticism”), higher visions, claimed divine messages of angels, etc. – these ideas that seem to elevate some to super

² Our Bibles use the English translation “baptized” here, but “baptized” in the Greek means “immersed.” Because a number of Christian traditions now practice a baptism that involves something less than full immersion, we use the more direct translation into English of “immersion.” This more literal translation keeps Paul's image of burial (into water as opposed to earth) and resurrection (lifting out of the water as opposed to earth).

spirituality are without merit in themselves. The merit comes in holding fast to Jesus and his body, growing and working together in love and purpose.

When we died to sin, we died to the world as well. Why after dying to this world with its human rules and regulations (“do not touch or handle or taste,” etc.) would a believer resubmit to them? Especially when they offer only the appearance of religion when in fact they serve no real purpose? The rules that heap self-denial on the body never work to really stop the selfishness inherent in the old man!

As people who have died in Christ and were then raised with Christ, believers should seek the things of Christ. These are the eternal matters that count to the one who sits at God’s right hand. Believers should set our minds on these things, not on the things of the old earth and old life. Believers are hidden within Christ at God’s right hand. Let believers be concerned with the things of Christ.

When Paul wrote that the Colossians were not to regard rules of human concoction, Paul never meant to imply or teach that one was free to do as one wished without regard to morality. To the contrary, this teaching also meant that believers should have no part of old sinful ways. Sexual immorality, impurity, dishonorable passions, evil desires, coveting (which is really a form of idolatry by valuing something over God and his supply) should not be part of the believer’s walk. These are the things that God is coming to destroy. These are the things that are destructive to people, and as such, are the subject of God’s holy wrath.

Even though believers have such sin in their past, it is no longer to be in their lives. Believers should put away anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk. No more lying. Believers should put off the old self and walk in the new life. This is life as a believer, whether Jew, Greek, circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarian, or any other categories. There are really only two groups, the saved regenerate born-again believer and the unsaved degenerate.

The negative behaviors of the old man are replaced by the graces of God. The believer is to be different from the world with a compassionate heart, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Forgiveness of each other is a hallmark of the believer. It all flows out of love, the real sign and seal that binds the believing community into one body. This is the body where the peace of Christ rules.

In this body, believers live in gratitude as the word of Christ indwells the believer and the body. The believers teach and admonish one another in wisdom. They sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with hearts of thanksgiving. Everything the believer does, everything the believer says, everything is to be done in light of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, with grateful hearts to the one who put us into Christ.

For example, in practical everyday terms of home life, wives should submit to their husbands in the manner that is fitting in the Lord. Husbands should love their wives in the manner fitting in the Lord. Parents should rear their children in a manner fitting in the Lord. Slaves should obey their masters sincerely as is fitting with the Lord. Masters should treat their slaves as is fitting with the Lord. Everyone needs to see his/her actions in light of Christ and the service we owe Jesus our Lord.

The believer's life should constantly be in communication (prayer) with God. Paul wanted the Colossians to pray with thanksgiving over their lives and his as well. Paul wanted prayer that he would have even more open doors to spread the message of Jesus, and that when the doors opened, Paul would share the gospel with clarity.

The Colossians needed to be cognizant of how they walked, not only in the body, but also before the world and its unbelievers. They needed to make the best use of the time. Their speech should always be gracious, "seasoned with salt."

Paul has a lot going on in his own life that he does not write about, instead noting that Tychicus, who was likely bringing the letter, would fill the church in with the details. Paul adds that he is sending his "faithful and beloved brother" Onesimus back to the church as a fellow Christian. More on Onesimus next week when we read Philemon!

Paul has a number of other personal ties with the church that are worth mentioning. Paul wanted the Colossians to share this letter with the nearby church at Laodicea. He also thought it useful that the Colossians read the Laodicean letter which no doubt prompted some of Paul's concerns expressed in this letter.

Paul closes by writing his own name in greeting with an add-on that the Colossians remember the chains he wore. Paul then blesses the church with God's grace.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God"* (Col. 1:15).

We struggle at times to understand the nature of Christ. How Christ could be fully God and yet fully human? How can Christ be different from God the Father and yet God is still one (Christians are not polytheists!)? Paul does not address these issues directly in our terminology. Still, we do have from him affirmations that we claim as orthodox Bible-believing Christians. In Colossians, there are a number of these affirmations. In Jesus we see God. We see God fully. Jesus is not a part of God, nor does part of God indwell Jesus. In Jesus, the fullness of God dwells. This is the

Jesus that resides in our hearts, who stakes his claim on our souls for eternity. This is the one who has brought us into reconciliation with God. God himself is at work in our hearts just as Jesus is at work. We may not understand it fully, but that does not make it any less true.

2. *“Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus”* (Col. 3:17).

Do everything? *Everything*? Is Paul sure? Oh yes, he is very sure! Paul is extremely emphatic! When Paul wrote this section, he stresses three times that *all things* should be done in the name of Jesus (meaning “in light of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done”). Paul wrote: (1) Whatever you do, (2) whether in word or deed³ (3) do everything. Authentic mature Christianity is not merely something that occurs on a Sunday morning. It is found in the nitty-gritty of each day’s activities and frustrations. It is found in the mundane as well as the exciting. It is found in the murky waters of challenging ethics and worrisome decisions. “Do *EVERYTHING* in the name of the Lord Jesus!”

3. *“Walk in wisdom ... making the best use of the time”* (Col 4:5).

This takes us back to the beginning of this class. There is no pause or rewind button in our life. Each moment that passes is gone. May God help us make the most of each passing moment, of each opportunity! Live each moment recognizing its uniqueness. Live each moment for God.

WANT MORE?

Consider taking 15 minutes, grabbing a pen and your Bible. Turn to Colossians and read it carefully, making a note each time Paul makes a statement about Christ. The list you produce will be marvelous as you see the many adjectives and phrases used by Paul.

³ In Greek thought, everything could be divided into two categories: things that pertained to ideas and things that pertained to actions. These were categories of “words” and “deeds.” So here, by mentioning “in word or deed” Paul is saying “everything” in yet another way.