

Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians

Colossians 2:6-15

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians 2. We will concentrate on verses 8-15, but we will begin reading at verse 6 where we looked at this great book the last time.

Colossians 2:8-15

Lord, this is Your word and it was a word that You have given to us, not just to the Colossians, but to Your people of all ages and even to us this day. So You mean it for our edification, for our instruction, for our training in righteousness. So by Your word and by Your Spirit, reprove us, rebuke us, correct us and build us up in the Lord. We ask, O God, that You would give us seeing eyes and hearing ears and willing hearts to be obedient to Your word. Search us out by the Spirit to find if there is any unclean thing in us and speak to us by Your word, we pray. And we will give You all the praise and all the glory. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

In our studies in the Book of Colossians, we have emphasized over and over that Paul teaches in this book that believers are complete in Christ. By and large, his teaching has been positive in the chapters so far. He has set out who Christ is. He has set out the supremacy of Christ. And he says that because Christ is supreme, because all the fullness dwells in Him, therefore He is a sufficient savior. You do not need to look anywhere else.

Beginning in verse 8 of this chapter, however, and for a number of verses, he is going to go negative. That is a phrase you heard in the campaign in the last few weeks. The Apostle Paul employs it theologically. In other words he means he is not only going to tell you what is true, he is going to warn you against that which is false.

But in this passage he is concerned to warn the Colossians against what he calls “philosophy.” By that, by the way, he is not warning these students against Plato and Aristotle and Socrates. He is after a different kind of philosophy. He is not speaking of Greek philosophy and he is not even speaking of modern

philosophy. He is speaking of this mishmash of teaching which these new teachers, the false teachers in Colossae have been pawing off on the good Christians there in that particular congregation. We will describe that a little later.

But I want you to understand that in this passage, as Paul combats the false teaching, he not only warns the Colossians to be on guard against that false teaching, but he also tells them that in fellowship with Christ, there is fullness, there is forgiveness, and there is freedom. All those things, he says, come in Christ. And he says that precisely because the false teachers are suggesting that it is only through obedience to their teaching that Christians can truly attain the fullness and forgiveness and freedom. But the Apostle Paul combats these teachings by reminding us again of who Jesus is and of the benefits we have in union with Him.

The passage before us outlines fairly easily. In verse 8 we see Paul's warning. He tells them to be on guard against the false teaching. In verses 9 and 10, Paul again reminds us who Christ is and what that means for us in general. And then in verses 11-15, he points out three specific benefits from our union with Christ, and those benefits are designed to counter the teaching of the false teachers in Colossae.

I. Christians must be on the alert for false speculations.

Let's look at this passage together this morning. Beginning in verse 8, Paul makes it clear that Christians must be on the alert against false speculations. You see his words there: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception." The word "philosophy" can refer to any sort of outlook and philosophy of life. This doesn't have to be an exalted, speculative philosophy that includes epistemology and metaphysics and all sorts of wonderful things that college Classic majors study or perhaps college philosophy majors study even here at Belhaven College. This is something much more humble. This is an outlook of philosophy of life that has been developed by combining Christianity with a little bit of Judaism and a little bit of pagan belief and it has been pawed off on these people in Colossae. In fact, the Apostle Paul calls it something not very complimentary in the next phrase. He says actually it is not philosophy, it is empty deceit. It is vain deceit. There is nothing to this teaching that is being offered to you. He says to be on guard against that.

And he gives us three hallmarks of this sort of false teaching, this sort of philosophy. You see it there in the next phrase. "According to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." In each of those three phrases, Paul gives us a description of the hallmarks of this false teaching.

First, notice it is according to the tradition of men. In other words, Paul says it is

man made. This teaching is not based on the Word of God. It is not based on the words of Christ. It is not based on Apostolic preaching. It is man made. It comes from outside the scripture. You understand what he is saying. Here, these people saying, "Oh, well these things that you have learned in the Scriptures, they are good. If you really want to understand the genius, the fullness of Christian experience, then I have some secret teaching that is not normally understood in the context of Christian churches planted by the Apostle Paul. Go listen to that and then you will really grow." The Apostle Paul says that teaching is man made. It is not rooted in the Word of God. He says you be on guard against anyone who comes to you with the teaching that cannot be grounded and substantiated in the Word of God.

Then he says it is rudimentary. In the next phrase he says it is according to the elementary principles of the world. That is a notoriously difficult phrase and commentators stumble over it. In fact, when I look at that phrase I am reminded of what Peter said in his book when he said Paul writes things which are difficult to understand. This is one of those places. It may be that Paul is referring to ethical principles of behavior which are not grounded in the Word of God. Or Paul may be thinking of a particular teaching that says there are demonic spiritual beings who control elementary principles in the universe like the stars and such. And those stars then control our lives. It would not be unlike astrology, where there are people who believe that the position of the planets and the stars actually control human destiny. And it may be that these false teachers then say we can exercise power. If you will follow our secret knowledge and our secret teachings and our secret rituals, we can exercise power over these spiritual beings who are controlling the elementary principles, the stars, the planets, the sun, the moon. And, therefore, we can take control of our lives and find fullness and freedom. And the Apostle Paul is saying you don't need to follow that teaching, because Christ is over all things. He is over the stars, He is over the elementary principles, and He is over the spiritual world. Christ is head of everything. You don't this new teaching, he says. So any teaching which comes to you saying we have a way of controlling the elementary principles of the world, say I don't need it. My Lord is already in control.

And then a third thing he says, that these teachings are not in accord with Christ. They are not according to Christ. In other words, they don't measure up or, perhaps, they positively contradict the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ that the Apostle Paul has been teaching. Perhaps they contradict the sufficiency of Christ's saving work. Perhaps they positively suggest that something needs to be added to the work of Christ. But they don't accord with the gospel that the Apostle Paul is preaching. And he says, "You be on the lookout for these types of speculations and you reject them."

Friends, that is no less important for us today than it was for the Colossians. Because there are just as many religious philosophies on the market today, if not more, than there were in the day of the Apostle Paul and these believers. And

there are perhaps more Christians today who are likely to blend their Christianity with these other false teachings than perhaps there would have been even in the days of the apostles.

So Paul's warnings to the Colossians are a warning for us. Are we on guard against false teaching? When you pick up books on religious subjects, are we on guard to make sure they square with the true teachings of the Word of God? Do we get our religious learning from every place under the sun? There are many today who say oh, you should go and learn the truth about God from any source you can find. According to the Apostle Paul, that is not true. He says if it is not according to the Word of God, you stop your ears. Do not listen to it. It is not in accord with the Word of God. If it claims to give you teachings from outside the scriptures and if the teaching is not in accord with the basic doctrinal teaching about Christ, you reject it. Turn it off. You be on guard against it.

Not only that, we must not only be guard against that teaching, but we must positively know the gospel itself if we are going to be able to know the difference between the real thing and a counterfeit. If we don't know Christ, how will we know when someone is teaching us something false about Christ? How will we know about Christ if we do not study Him as He is presented in the gospel? Paul's words here are very important for us. He says be on guard. That is the duty of every Christian. Not just the elders, not just the deacons, not just the minister, but every Christian should follow the example of the Bereans and be on guard against false teaching.

I can tell you of many conversations I have had in the last number of months about ministers who have at one times in their lives been preachers apparently of the truth who have departed from the truth which is in Christ and they have gone after other teachings. If it can happen to ministers, it can happen to members. And all of us must be on guard against that false teaching. That is the first thing that Paul says in the passage.

II. Christians must remember who Christ is and who we are in union with Him.

Then he turns our eyes to Christ in verses 9 and 10, and he reminds us that we Christians must remember who Jesus is and who we are in Him. If we will remember those two things, we will be unlikely to fall prey to false teaching. Notice again his words: "For in Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form. For in Him, you have been made complete. And He is the head over all rule and authority." Again, Paul tells us three things that we need to remember in this passage, in each of those phrases.

The first is the fullness dwells in Christ. In this context, he means in Christ are found not just the attributes of God, not just the works of God, but in Christ is

found the essence of God. All the fullness of deity dwells in Him in bodily form. He doesn't just look like God. He is the Second Person of the Trinity in the flesh. He doesn't just do the work of God, the essence of His being exudes deity. There is nothing ungodlike about the Lord Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul says. And any teaching about Christ which says less than that is not the teaching of the scripture. "In Him all the fullness of the deity dwells in bodily form." So even when other teachers compliment our Lord by saying, "Oh, he was a great prophet," they do not honor Him. "Oh, he was a great teacher," they do not honor Him. He is not merely a great prophet and a great priest and a great king and a great teacher. He is the Son of God. In Him, all the fullness of the deity dwells.

Paul reminds us of that truth because if all the deity dwells in Him, why would we need to go anywhere else to experience the fullness of life and salvation? Why would we need to go anywhere else to experience the fullness of forgiveness? Why would we need to go anywhere else to experience true freedom than our Lord Jesus Christ?

He goes to say we are complete in Him. He draws the inference. "In Him all the fullness of the deity dwells." We are complete in Him. In Him you have been made complete. There is nothing that we need to be spiritually grown and prospered and matured and complete that we cannot find in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no mediator between Him and us that we need to go to. There is no method which He does not provide in His word. There is no means which He has not provided for in His word. Christ Himself is everything that we need to be complete. He has provided the means of grace, the word, the prayer, and the sacraments. He has provided the ministry in order to minister those means of grace to His people. And there is nothing else which needs to be added to that for us to attain completeness.

Then finally, he says in that passage: "He is the head over all rule and authority. That is, everything is under Christ's authority. Therefore, there is nobody else that we need to go to in order to teach some alien power exercising authority over our lives. There is an interesting truth that is set forth here by Paul and that is this truth. The Lordship of Christ brings freedom. In many Christian

circles today, there are people who say that Christ can be your savior and not be your Lord. And by that they say that it is possible for a Christian to live as if that Christ was not his or her Lord. And, of course, there are some good responses to that. It has been said if Christ is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all. But in this passage Paul turns that truth around in another direction and he gets you to look at it from a different angle. His point is this: The Lordship of Christ is, in fact, what brings you freedom and if Christ is not your Lord, you are not free. Christ's lordship releases you from slavery to sin and to the world. Because He is Lord, you have been freed. And because He is Lord over all authority, we do not need to find secret rites in order to bind the elementary principles of the world from having authority over us, because He has already exercised His authority over

them.

Fullness of life is in Him, because in Him the fullness of the deity dwells, because we are complete in Him and because everything is under His authority.

III. Christians must remember the specific benefits which flow from our being “in Christ.”

And that leads then to verses 11-15 where the Apostle Paul works out the specific benefits which flow from our being united with Christ. We have used that phrase a number of times, united to Christ. Paul is just talking about a doctrine called “union with Christ.” It is one of the most mysterious and glorious doctrines of the faith, that believers, by the Spirit, through faith, are united to Christ. I can't tell you all that those words mean. But the scriptures speak of union with Christ with a variety of analogies.

Sometimes Christ illustrates what He means by talking about Him being the vine and us being the branches. Sometimes Paul talks about us being a building and each of us are the collected parts of the building and Christ is the cornerstone. And sometimes Paul uses the metaphor of marriage and speaks of our being united to Christ as a husband is to a wife. Sometimes Paul uses the metaphor of the body and Christ is the head and we are the body. Over and over, these images of being united to Christ are used in the scripture. Paul says in this passage that if we will understand what it is to be united to Christ, we will not fall prey to false teaching which professes to offer fullness and we will be grown in the faith.

What is it to be united with Christ? Well, it doesn't mean to cease to be who you are. When you marry a person, you don't cease to be who you are. You continue to be who you were. But you are united to them in a relationship, in an intimacy, in a closeness, that you have never had before. When we are united with Christ, we do not become Christ, Christ does not become us. We do not become God. But we enter into a covenantal relationship with Him whereby He is ours and we are His. And whereby all the benefits of His life and death flow to us. Paul is going to talk about some of those benefits in verses 11-15. Let's look at them together. The first one you see is fellowship. We have this intimate relationship, this fellowship, this community of life, this sharing of life with Christ. He speaks about it in verses 11 and 12: “and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. “

Now here, Paul speaks about parallels between baptism and circumcision. And before we looked at the context of Paul's argument is here, this opportunity

behooves me to say a few words about baptism. A good Presbyterian couldn't let this verse get by without a comment and besides, baptism is on my mind right now.

Notice three or four things that we learn about baptism from this passage. The first thing is there is a definite relationship between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism. John Calvin is not the one who invented that relationship. John Knox is not the one who invented that relationship. Paul is the one who is telling us about it under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Look at the two main clauses. "In Him you were circumcised, having been buried with Him in baptism." What is Paul saying? Apparently these false teachers are saying to the Colossian Christians that one of the rituals they need to do if they are going to attain fullness is to be circumcised. And Paul is saying you have been circumcised by being baptized in Christ. In other words, there is a precise relation between those two signs. One an Old Covenant sign, one a New Covenant sign. You Gentile Colossian Christians, you were baptized. Having been baptized, you received a sign of the same significance of which Old Testament circumcision stood.

The second thing we note is that baptism here is viewed as a covenant sign. Know that circumcision in the Old Testament in Genesis 17 was a covenant sign. In Genesis 17, circumcision was given to Abraham by God as a sign and a seal of the promises that God had made to him in the covenant in Genesis 12 and 15. So circumcision served to assure Abraham that God would fulfill His promises to him. Paul says here that you have been circumcised, having been baptized. By saying that, he is reminding us that baptism is a sign of the promises of God that are made to us in Christ. And it is meant to assure us that God will fulfill His promises that He has made to us in the gospel. It is a sign to remind us of God's faithfulness.

Thirdly, this passage tells us something about the meaning of baptism. Isn't it interesting that faith is not emphasized as great meaning of baptism? Many of our friends who teach adult believer's baptism only teach us that baptism is about our faith in Christ. But Paul doesn't put it that way in this passage. In this passage, he says baptism is about our union with Christ and about the work of God towards us. In other words, the symbolism of baptism is to symbolize God's reaching out to us when we were helpless, uniting us to Christ, and saving us.

Now, of course, Paul says that we were raised up with Him through faith and the working of God. So there is a place for faith, indeed. We don't downplay that at all. But Paul's point in the passage is that baptism itself is a sign of our union with Christ, a sign of God reaching out to us when we could not reach out to Him.

Fourthly, this passage tells us something about the subject of baptism. Many of our Baptist friends are confused. We Presbyterians and others baptize children and they say how can you baptize infants who are not able to exercise faith or

even understand this happening to them. That is precisely the point. For in Genesis 17, the eight-day-old Isaac surely could not have known what was happening to him when he was exercised and he could not have exercised outward, objective faith in the living God. Yet God said Abraham circumcise that boy. Because it is a sign of 'My having set My heart on you and your descendants. And as your descendants embrace Me, they will look back at that circumcision and remember that I embraced them before they embraced me.'

So also in baptism, God reaches out and sets a sign on us so that when we grow and once embrace Christ personally through faith, we can look back and see that before we loved Him, He loved us in Christ.

Now, that is about all we have time for about baptism. What Paul is saying all this stuff about though? Why is he paralleling circumcision and baptism? Apparently because these people are commending the Jewish ritual of circumcision as necessary for these Gentile believers. And the Apostles says in baptism you have symbolized precisely what is symbolized in circumcision. And in baptism you have set forth the truth that you are united in fellowship to Christ. Notice the closeness of the image. You were buried with Christ. You were raised with Christ. You couldn't be closer to Him than you are. Your baptism reminds you that your life has become intertwined with His life. You have died to sin in Him even as He died for sin. You have been raised to newness of life even as His resurrection was a token of His dominion over sin and death in the forces evil. Your life has become intertwined with Him by the working of God. You have a fellowship with Christ.

Notice in verses 13 and 14, he goes on to say the result of this union, the result of this fellowship which you have in union with Christ, this relationship, this covenantal relationship that you have with Christ, this union with Christ, the result of it is forgiveness of sin and freedom in Christ.

First of all, in verses 13 and 14 Paul speaks of the forgiveness that we have in Christ. "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."

Paul is saying that because of our sin, we were condemned. We were dead in sin and the moral law condemned us. As we looked at the law, we saw that we did not measure up and, therefore, Paul said we are judged. But Christ has died and so has nailed the certificate of guilt, the certificate of death, the bond which had placed against us because of our sin, He has nailed it to the tree, dying in our stead, and by dying for us, we have been made alive through the forgiveness of sin.

Paul says as you are united with Christ, you are forgiven of your sin because He paid the price so that you would not be called to account at the bar of God's justice.

Verse 15 goes on to say the second results of our union with Christ is freedom. "When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him." Paul is saying these false teachers, they come to you, they tell you we can give you power over these spiritual forces which are arrayed against you. And Paul says that you don't need that because Christ is already exercising dominion over the spiritual forces which are arrayed against God and His people. Because at the cross, He disarmed rulers and authorities, set over against the rule of God. He led them in a triumphant procession.

If you had been in the Roman world in the times that the generals were going out and conquering the far-flung nations, you wouldn't have had CNN to tell you about the great victories that were being won on the frontiers. So the only way a Roman general could show you that he had really won a great battle was to parade all the captives, all the prisoners, in front of your eyes. He would go out to the Rhine frontier. He would defeat the barbarians. He would put them in shackles and march them back into the hometown. The great soldiers would come first, the conquering king would then come, and behind him all of the captives, imprisoned.

Paul is saying that is what Christ has done to the spiritual forces arrayed against you. He has led a triumphant procession in which they are brought along behind Him in the train as slaves. Now Paul says if Christ has done that, what in the world are these teachers doing telling you that they can give you authority over these people? Christ has already exercised this authority over everything that is arrayed against you and your freedom is assured because of His victory. You are not a victim in this world of demonic forces. You are not a victim in this world of the alignment of the stars and planets. You are not a victim in this world of fate and the outrageous claims of fortune, because Christ rules the world for the sake of His people. Because Christ is Lord, you are free. And if He is not Lord, you are not free. Christ and fellowship with Him brings fullness and forgiveness and freedom.

If we will embrace Christ by faith, we will taste all the benefits of union with Him. If we will reject Christ and His Lordship or if we attempt to supplement Him, we do not receive all the benefits which are stored up in Him alone. This day are you guarding Your heart against false teaching which downplays the totality of Christ's victory and are you embracing and appreciating everything that you have in Christ? Everything that you need is there for you in Christ. Come to Him.

Let us pray.

Our Lord, we praise You for the Christ who has triumphed on our behalf. We praise You for the forgiveness of sin by His blood. We praise You for the freedom that we have because He is Lord. We praise You for the fellowship that we have with Him, that covenantal union that we have. We pray, O Lord, that You would help us to enjoy it and taste it now, in foretaste of the marriage feast with the Lamb. We give You all the praise and all the glory. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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