

Paul's Prison Epistles

Lesson Guide

LESSON
TWO

PAUL AND THE
COLOSSIANS



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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Preparation

- Read the book of Colossians.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:25)

II. Background (2:32)

Paul's letters were:

- Personal and pastoral
- Motivated by love and concern
- Occasional —written to address specific issues in particular times and places

A. Relationships (3:58)

1. Church (4:17)

Paul had probably never visited the church in Colosse (Colossians 2:1).

Paul had an indirect relationship with the Colossians through representatives such as:

- Epaphras
- Philemon
- Onesimus
- Tychicus

Paul and the Colossians corresponded with each other.

Paul and the Colossians ministered to each other (Colossians 1:9).

2. Individuals (7:31)

Paul had friends that labored alongside him in gospel ministry, including (Philemon 1-2):

- Philemon
- Apphia
- Archippus

- Epaphras — Paul’s fellow worker and fellow prisoner, a faithful minister of Christ
- Onesimus — Slave who sought out Paul after fleeing from Philemon; ministered to Paul in prison.

B. Problems in Colosse (10:17)

Paul received a report from Epaphras about false teachings threatening the churches of the Lycus Valley. In order to defend the church against these false teachings, Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians.

1. Greek Philosophy (11:32)

“Philosophy” — Typically applied to occult religions, especially those that were based on religious traditions such as:

- Mysteries
- Rites
- Secret knowledge
- Secret wisdom

True mystery, wisdom and knowledge were found only in Christ, and not in pagan religions (Colossians 2:1-4).

Paul explicitly identified pagan philosophy as his target and condemned it (Colossians 2:8).

False teachers in Colosse were enamored with beliefs and practices similar to those found in Greek religion and occult mysticism.

Asceticism — An improper avoidance of physical pleasure; often rooted in the mistaken idea that pleasure is immoral; sometimes advocates inflicting physical pain on oneself.

Paul objected to the ascetic practices in Colosse (Colossians 2:20-23):

- Asceticism was based on the basic principals of the world.
- It was of no value in resisting sin.

2. Jewish Law (16:11)

In Colosse, their use and understanding of Jewish law departed both from traditional Judaism and from proper Christian practices.

False teachers were using Jewish teachings and practices in corrupt ways (Colossians 2:16).

Their practices distorted Old Testament law and endangered the eternal destinies of those who followed them (Colossians 2:17-18).

Paul wrote against abuses of the Mosaic Law, but he did not write against the law itself (Colossians 2:11-12).

3. **Spiritual Beings (20:22)**

The false teachers in Colosse promoted the worship of spiritual beings.

- **Angels**

Ministering spirits to whom God delegates many jobs (Hebrews 1:14).

Paul condemned the teaching that angels were cosmic powers that revealed mysteries to those who would perform cultic rites and worship them (Colossians 2:18).

This exaggerated view of the power and influence of angels was not uncommon in the ancient world.

- **Rulers and Authorities**

“Powers” and “authorities” — spiritual beings such as angels.

Paul emphasized Christ’s superiority over every power and authority in heaven and on earth (Colossians 1:16).

The false teachers attributed to these invisible rulers actions and abilities that belong to Christ alone (Colossians 1:16).

The real contrast was not the spiritual over the earthly, but Christ over all.

The spiritual powers worshiped by the false teachers in Colosse were fallen, powerless, defeated demons (Colossians 2:15).

- **Basic Principles**

stoicheia — “basic principles,” referring to gods and spiritual powers associated with stars and planets or the four basic elements (earth, wind, fire, water)

Paul referred to the basic principles when he warned the Galatians not to turn back to “those who by nature are not gods” (Galatians 4:8-9).

These basic principles were the basis for the philosophy of the false teachers (Colossians 2:8).

The false teachers appear to have combined:

- Jewish legalism
- Pagan religion
- Christianity

The false teachers appear to have encouraged the worship of the basic principles.

III. Structure and Content (31:57)**A. Salutation, 1:1-2 (32:47)**

Identifies the apostle Paul as the authoritative author of this letter, and mentions that the letter also comes from Paul's disciple Timothy.

B. Encouragements, 1:3-14 (33:14)

The encouragements of thanksgiving and intercession follow reports that Paul received from Epaphras.

C. Final Greetings, 4:7-18 (34:04)

Paul sent greetings to the Colossians from the many people who were with him in prison.

Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon were written and delivered at approximately the same time.

Paul wrote these letters to specific people in particular circumstances, but he intended them to be applicable to different audiences.

D. Supremacy of Christianity, 1:15–4:6 (35:20)

In the main body of the letter, this section details the supremacy of Christianity over the religion of the false teachers.

1. Supremacy of Christ, 1:15-20 (36:17)

Paul detailed the supremacy of Christ in contrast to the false teachings in Colosse.

- **Image of God, 1:15**

In some Greek philosophies, the universe was thought to be God's image, the greatest revelation of God.

Paul called Christ the “image of God” to show that Christ was the ultimate revelation of God.

- **Firstborn over all Creation, 1:15**

Paul called Christ the firstborn over all creation using the Greek word *prōtotokos* — a term often referring to superiority and authority rather than to order of birth.

Some cults falsely believe this term indicates that Christ was “born” and is not equal to God the Father.

Paul associated Christ's status as "firstborn" with his authority and supremacy over all creation. He said nothing about a time when Jesus did not exist.

Christ, and Christ alone, was the firstborn who inherited all the blessings of God and who alone could give them to others.

- **Agent of Creation, 1:16**

Christ is the one through whom God created the universe.

Jewish mysticism attributed creation to the angels; Greek philosophers attributed it to the elements or astral powers.

Christ was the only agent of creation; other powers were inferior to him and subject to him.

Christ's priority as the agent of creation makes him far superior to everything within creation.

- **Supreme Lord, 1:18**

Christ is the supreme Lord because God placed him as head over the church.

Any system that seeks to supplant or qualify Christ's unique sovereignty must be false.

- **God Incarnate, 1:19**

Paul's claim that Christ is God incarnate surpassed any claim about the "rulers" and "authorities" of Greek paganism and Jewish mysticism.

- **Only Reconciler, 1:20**

Christ is the only reconciler between God and man.

Jesus Christ is the agent and the means through whom God is purging sin from the world, and making peace with humanity.

2. **Supremacy of Christ's Ministers, 1:21–2:5 (48:20)**

- **Reconciliation through the Christian Gospel, 1:21-23; 2:5**

Paul and the Colossians had already experienced reconciliation through the gospel.

False teachers encouraged people to placate demons but their so-called gospel had no power to save.

Colossian believers experienced the true reconciliation that comes through the true gospel.

- **Altruism, 1:24**

Paul spoke of his suffering on behalf of the church.

Paul's suffering benefited the church by:

- Providing a powerful witness to the gospel
- Encouraging the church
- Completing the sufferings of Christ

- **Divine Commission, 1:25**

Paul had been appointed to his apostleship by the Lord himself.

Jesus gave Paul authority to speak on his behalf, making Paul's authority far superior to that of the false teachers.

The false teachers relied on idolatrous ideas that human beings had invented (2:8).

- **Revelation, 1:25-28; 2:2-4**

The revelation Paul received was superior to that attested by the false teachers (2:4).

Paul spent three years in the desert of Arabia and Damascus receiving revelations from God (Galatians 1:15-18).

The false teachers relied on traditions that had been passed down through human hands.

- **Empowerment, 1:29-2:1**

God gave power to Christ's ministers.

The Holy Spirit gifted Paul with astounding gifts to advance the kingdom of God on earth (1:29):

- Words to speak
- Opportunities to speak
- Miracles to confirm his witness

3. **Supremacy of Salvation in Christ, 2:6-23 (56:44)**

- **Life in Christ, 2:6-15**

- Lordship of Christ, 2:6-10

Because Christ is our Lord we are rooted, built up and strengthened in him.

Those under Christ's Lordship were given authority to rule with him.

- Spiritual Vitality, 2:11-13

We have spiritual vitality because we are in union with Christ.

We participate in Christ's death, resulting in forgiveness, and his resurrection and life, resulting in the rebirth of our spirits.

- Forgiveness, 2:13-15

We are freed from having to merit salvation through works of the law.

Because we are united to Christ in his death, we have already died the death that the law requires.

- **Life Under Elements, 2:16-23**

- Lordship of Creatures, 2:16-18

Life under the tyrannical lordship of mere creatures results in judgment and in the loss of the blessings Christ offers.

- Spiritual Weakness, 2:19

Subjection to the elements results in separation from Christ and spiritual weakness

- Asceticism, 2:23

Subjection to the false gods of Colosse resulted in harsh living that was of no use against sin.

Harsh living was supposed to lead to blessings but the demons had no power to bless anyone.

The salvation offered in Christ is far better than the blessings purported by the false teachers in Colosse.

4. Supremacy of Christian Living, 3:1–4:6 (1:02:41)

The Christian lifestyle is far more ethical than the lifestyle advocated by the false teachers.

Paul taught that we are to value the spiritual and heavenly things more highly than the earthly things (3:2).

Paul agreed with the ascetic teachers that fleshly indulgence is evil but disagreed with them as to how to avoid such sin (3:5).

The ascetics claimed to point to the spiritual realm, but their teachings focused on mundane, earthly matters.

Paul taught specific ways that believers could focus on and strive for things that were spiritually oriented (3:9-11).

Paul's key to ethical living:

- We are united to Christ.
- We have “new selves” or “new natures.”
- We are being inwardly renewed by God.
- This union and renewal enable us to live ethically.

Paul offered practical ways that believers can rely on God's power to overcome sin (3:12).

Believers can succeed in ethical living by:

- Emphasizing heavenly, spiritual virtues like compassion and kindness
- Not by focusing on the sins we are trying to avoid

Unlike ascetic practices which are of no value against sin, Paul's method actually made ethical living possible.

IV. Modern Application (1:10:18)

A. Loyalty to Christ (1:11:04)

During the first century, the dominant religious ideas in the Roman Empire were polytheistic (belief in multiple gods and spiritual powers).

The Roman Empire persecuted Christians largely because the Christians refused to acknowledge and to worship the gods of the civic cult.

Christ demands exclusive worship — if we worship Christ, we cannot worship anything else (1:22-23).

If we do not remain faithful to Christ, we are not saved.

Our modern world frequently challenges our loyalty to Christ by presenting many different gods for us to worship.

Not all pressures come from outside the church.

We feel pressures to be disloyal to Christ. We must reject these false notions and embrace Christ alone.

B. Spiritual Focus (1:17:31)

Our salvation does not depend upon our earthly pursuits, but upon spiritual realities:

- Restored spirits
- Union with Christ

Regeneration makes us new people. We are not just forgiven; we are also spiritually changed (Colossians 2:13).

Our spirits have been made new; now we are spiritual people. The most beneficial thing for us to do is to focus on our spiritual lives (3:1-2).

To focus on suppressing sinful desires is still to focus on sinful desires.

We should refocus our attention away from earthly matters and onto spiritual matters. But spiritual matters require our participation in the world (3:12-16).

To be heavenly minded is to focus on the one who has ascended to heaven, namely Christ, in order that we might be more like him while we are here on earth.

Paul's moral instructions pertain to spiritual or heavenly matters. Yet, they can only be carried out through active involvement in the present world.

V. Conclusion (1:28:37)

5. How were Christ's ministers supreme over the false teachers in Colosse?

6. How is Christ's salvation superior to the plans that the false teachers in Colosse offered?

7. What makes Christian living superior to other approaches to morality?

8. Summarize the structure and content of Colossians.

9. Why is it important to remain loyal to Christ?

10. Why is it important to have a spiritual focus?

Application Questions

1. The negative influence of the false teachers made it difficult for the Colossian believers to discern truth from error. What influences in your own culture make it hard to discern truth from error? How can Paul's focus on the supremacy of Christianity guide our own strategy in dealing with error?
2. How should understanding that Christ is the supreme agent of creation shape your approach to the world's challenges and opportunities?
3. How has Christ reconciled you to God? What areas of your world or relationships would be different if Christ's reconciling work were brought to completion?
4. Paul prayed for the Colossians. What benefits might there be to following his example?
5. How does union with Christ help Christians live ethically? Why should this strategy be more effective than the ethical strategies of the ascetics? How does asceticism contrast with appropriate uses of the Christian disciplines?
6. In what areas of life are you challenged in your loyalty to Christ?
7. How should the truth of regeneration shape our view of ourselves and of others? How does regeneration makes us new people?
8. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study?