

God's Message to Us in Colossians

Halifax, NS

21 April 2019, 2:00 PM

Introduction

This afternoon, we will be doing an overview of Paul's epistle to the Colossians.

- In our present sermon series, I am preaching one or sometimes two sermons on each book of the Bible.
 - The focus is on how these books relate to us today.
 - The Bible is unique because while it was written to benefit those who first received it, it was also written to benefit the church in all succeeding generations.
 - That means that when we read it, it speaks to us the living oracles of God if God's Spirit is graciously at work in us so our otherwise stubborn hearts will receive the message as the very word of God.

Paul's Epistle to the Colossians was written to confront a particular problem that the church at Colossae had that still plagues the church today.

- Let me describe this problem and then we will look at how the letter to the Colossians addresses it.
 - A. What is the problem that is addressed in Colossians?
 - The problem of Christians supposing that we need something in addition to Christ to truly flourish in our Christian life.
 - B. Why do we have this problem?
 1. We have this problem because of the ongoing struggles we face in living the Christian life.
 2. From our perspective, it seems like once we come to Christ, we should immediately be victorious and glorified.
 - There are some good sentiments behind that thought.
 - Christ is a mighty Saviour and when we come to Him in faith, we are justified, we are forgiven, we are adopted, we are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are united to Christ in His death and resurrection so that we die and rise with Him to walk in newness of life.
 - That is all true.
 - So how is it that we still struggle with our old habits, with fear and worry, with selfishness, doubts, with loving God and each other as we should, with many failures and sins and inadequacies?
 - And not only that, but how is it that we also continue to struggle with sickness, poverty, inability to provide at times, perplexity about what we ought to do, weakness, accidents, harsh treatment from others, past and present injuries, attacks on our reputation, and all the other infirmities that people face in this life?
 - C. There are various kinds of responses to this problem.
 1. Some grow bitter about it.
 - Their Christian walk is hindered—

- The book of Numbers speaks of this wrong response—it shows how the people turned against God because they found that serving Him did not exempt them from hard things.
 - The book of Job shows us that even the most godly man alive struggled with this problem.
 - It is a theme that is often spoken of in scripture.
2. There are some who respond as they should to these struggles...
- There are those like Moses and Paul and Job overall...
 - They realise that it is through our troubles that we learn obedience.
 - They understand that God's way of having us grow in our true love and obedience to Him is not by translating us to the glory of heaven...
 - It is rather by given us grace to fight in the battle against our sin—to grow bit by bit in our obedience in the struggle of living for God.
 - Our love for God and our obedience grow when it is hard to obey.
 - There is a true work of God through all of this in our hearts.
 - It is way more interesting than being zapped to glory.
 - We have to go through the hard struggle of growth where we fail and then succeed and have to fight and pray and wrestle.
 - Even Jesus learned obedience through suffering as we saw this morning.
 - He did not ever disobey, but He learned obedience, as we all do, when obedience was hard to do.
 - It was one thing for Him to be told (as we all are) to give thanks to God for His daily bread... that was very much what He wanted to do.
 - But it was altogether different when He was told to go and suffer the rejection of His Father's favour on the cross as our High Priest.
 - As a man, He had to learn obedience—to learn what it was to obey God the Father because He is God.
 - Children, if you see your mom get out your favourite snack and she calls you to come and get some, you don't learn much about obedience.
 - But when you have a new video game that you want to play all day and she calls you to come and mop the kitchen floor—that is the time that you learn obedience.
 - It is the same for us older folks too.
 - It is one thing for us to obey God's command to give thanks when all is going well, but we learn obedience when we have to give thanks even when things are not going well.
 - It is one thing to love our neighbour who is kind to us, but quite another to learn to love our enemies.
- So there are those who become bitter and there are those who respond well...
- Those are two kinds of responses to remaining corruption and suffering...
 - But there is another wrong response as well.
3. The response of the Colossians was to conclude, as many Christians today have done, that they struggle because there is something missing.
- These Christians look for something more.

- In this way, they become easy prey to false teachers who come to tell them what they are missing. Sometimes these false teachers are taking advantage of these dear saints, but sometimes the teachers are also deceived and suppose that they really do have the missing ingredient.
- There are many different versions of the *something more* that are offered.
 - It includes such things as:
 - second-blessing experiences where you have a kind of second conversion experience that gives you victory,
 - the very common solution offered to the world that you need medication because of alleged chemical imbalances in your brain (for example, if you struggle with fear and anxiety, you need these meds to quell that—when fear is actually a good thing if it is directed toward God),
 - the idea that you need psychiatric therapy to deal with your past,
 - the notion that if you pray to the saints or do certain rituals—penance, ritual prayers, or something like that, you will be fixed,
 - the idea that demons need to be bound—that you need to get victory over spiritual forces that are oppressing you or be delivered from ancestral spirits...
 - There are all sort of the versions of “something more”
 - The *something more* of the Colossians was a mixture of Jewish and Greek philosophy (philosophy in the sense of spirituality) that would give you victory over spiritual forces—principalities and powers and dominions.
 - Believers were told that these spiritual forces were oppressing them and needed to be brought under control... and that way to do that was by abstaining from foods, observing Jewish holy days such as the new moons, worshipping angels... all these are mentioned in Col 2:15-23.
 - And you can find varieties of these in the church today...
 - There are those who pray to angels or the spirits of the dead for protection, those who sprinkle magic dust and say prayers to protect their doorway to keep out evil spirits, those who fast as a magical technique, those who repeat ritual prayers, those who wave their hands in ritual ways, I knew a fellow that marched around a farm while praying to put a hedge around his cattle and also anointed the cows with oil because he was having some problems on his farm.

Colossians addresses this ‘something more’ theology...

- Colossians is helpful, not only for those who may be taking these extreme “something more” measures,
 - but also for any of you who feel like something is missing in your Christian life and are thereby hindered in your walk and in your joy in Christ.

Colossians combats this “we must be missing something” error with three things...

I. You have Christ and He is all you need.

II. All of your efforts to rise above the struggle are keeping you from Christ.

III. What you need is simply to engage in the struggle against sin for the rest of your life as those who are risen with Christ.

Let's take a look at each of these.

I. You have Christ and He is all you need.

A. Paul seems to have this truth in mind right from the start.

1. As is usual with his letters, he greets them and gives thanks for their new life in Christ.
 - Paul never actually went to Colossae, but Epaphras had been under Paul's mentorship when Paul was at Ephesus in AD 53-55, and Epaphras had ministered to the Colossians under Paul's direction and had reported to Paul of their faith and love and had prayed for them with Paul.
 - Then in about AD 60, Epaphras had come to see Paul in prison to get advice about how to deal with the something more problem which led to Paul writing this letter to the Colossians.
- So Paul begins the letter with expressing how thankful he is for their life in Christ...but then...
2. But then in verse 5 he speaks in particular about **the hope that is laid up for you in heaven...**
 - With these words, he makes it clear that we are not to expect heaven now.
 - It is promised to us, it is certain, but it is laid up for us in heaven.
 - Heaven is where God is, and our certain hope is that at the last day, we will go to the Father and the Son to dwell with them forever.
 - But heaven is not yet.

B. And then Paul speaks of the content of his prayers of thanksgiving for them...

1. Notice, however, that he does not pray for complete victory now...
 - a. He does not pray for perfection, but for progress (growth) in their walk.
 - Col 1:9-11 says: **For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; ¹⁰ that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy;**
 - And notice that bit in verse 11...
 - b. He does not pray that they will be removed from all hardship, but that with God's help they will have (v. 11) **all patience and longsuffering with joy.**
 - He does not anticipate a life free from suffering in this world, but prays for patience and joy in the midst of suffering.
2. Then he launches in to a description of the excellence and pre-eminence of Christ.
 - a. First, that by Him, the Father has qualified us to be saints in light, transforming us from the kingdom of darkness into His kingdom.
 - In verse 14, he speaks of how we have redemption and forgiveness by Him... we are accepted because of Him, not because we have attained.
 - b. Then in verses 15-18, he describes Christ as the firstborn over all creation and as the firstborn from the dead!

- Colossians 1:15-18: **He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. 18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the pre-eminence.**
 - Notice the emphasis in verse 16 that those spiritual powers the Colossians were so concerned about, those thrones and dominions and principalities and powers, were created by Christ and exist now because of Him—
 - He has authority and is high above them all.
- c. Paul explains that the Father appointed that Christ should have all that we need for salvation by the cross.
 - He is all that we need for salvation so that if we have faith in Him, we have everything we need for acceptance with God.
 - Col 1:19-20 says: **For it pleased *the Father* that in Him all the fullness should dwell, 20 and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.**
 - Through Him, our lives are transformed, and through His flesh which was sacrificed, we are able to come to the Father as those cleansed.
 - According to verse 23, you have all of this **if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.**
 - In other words, if you continue with faith in Christ.
 - Again, we are not in glory yet, but we have faith in what God has promised in Christ.
 - We must not move away from the hope of the gospel, turning to these other things.
 - d. Paul preaches the mystery that is now revealed which is (vs 27), **“Christ in you, the hope of glory.”**
 - His ministry is aimed at presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus (v. 28), not perfect in their own righteousness or attainments.
 - It is Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man!

TRANS> Yes indeed, Christ is the Saviour the Father appointed and it is the Father’s will for Christ to be pre-eminent, to be the One who has all that we need.

- But Paul is distressed because he sees that the Colossians and the Laodiceans are listening to those who are telling them that something besides Christ is needed to make them complete.

- And so he makes it clear in chapter 2 that:

II. All of your efforts to rise above the struggle of life by adding to Christ are actually keeping you from Christ.

A. You see how Paul earnestly warns them about these extra things.

1. He begins in Col 2:1 by describing how distressed he is about what they are doing.
 - What a way to get their attention!
 - He says: **For I want you to know what a great conflict [or struggle] I have for you and those in Laodicea.**
 - That is strong language—it is not just a struggle, but a *great* struggle.
 - In verse 3, he explains that he wants them to be **united in the knowledge of Christ—in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**
 - He is distressed to see them running after all of these extra things, that divide their simple unity in the Saviour...
 - One is talking about worshipping angels...
 - Another is talking about new moon ceremony that magically helped him.
 - And yet another about his ritual fasting that warded off an evil spirit.
 - But Paul wants, as 2:2 says, their hearts to be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all the riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
 - He wants them to all drink from the pure fountain of Christ, not from all these other fountains that pollute the pure fountain of Jesus.
 - He wants them v. 7, **“rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.”**
2. He warns them to not allow themselves to be cheated by those who would call them to seek help in their walk from philosophy—or spirituality.
 - In verse 8 he says: **Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.**
 - And then in verse 9 & 10 he states again that they have everything in Christ...
 - 9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; 10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.**
 - He is trying to impress that upon them.
 - You don't need all these other things to make you godly and complete.

B. When you come to Christ, you die with Him so that you can live with Him.

1. There is a circumcision without hands and baptism.
 - He describes dying with Christ that you might live with Him in terms of the signs of initiation—circumcision in the Old Covenant and baptism in the New Covenant.
 - Both represent dying to sin and being made alive by Christ to live for God.
 - All the holy days, sabbaths, and food laws are mere shadows; now you have Christ and life, not from ceremonies, but from faith in Him.
 - We are not made holy by an Old Testament style of worship.
 - We must not turn our eyes to ceremonies, but to Christ...our New Testament ceremonies are only baptism and the Lord's Supper,
 - And they refer to Christ and His benefits bestowed on us rather than trying to take His place.

2. And don't let them cheat you by all their other devices... things like praying to angels and spirits or anointing cows with oil...
 - Such things take the place of Christ rather than leading you to Him...
 - Listen to 2:18-19: **“Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase *that is* from God.”**
 - Those who promote these things will tell you about all the benefits they got out them,
 - but in the end, all extra ceremonies lead us away from Christ.
 - This includes things like multimedia presentations, musical performances in place of simple singing of praise to God, man-made rules and regulations, praying to Mary.
 - These are all part of what Paul calls the doctrines and commandments of men of which he says, in verse 23: **These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.**
3. It is so easy in the spiritual battle to want something more.
 - We want some magic that will eradicate sin from our life—
 - We want freedom from our trials and we look for some way to gain mastery over the trials so we can eradicate them all.
 - We do not recognise that Christ already has mastery over them all and deliberately brings them into our path because we grow best when our obedience is hard and requires sacrifice...
 - Believers may be called to suffer imprisonment or even torture and death for Christ—that is when you grow...
 - Or when you have to bear patiently a lingering illness—you can pray for healing, but don't go looking to angels or rituals if Christ does not take your suffering away.
 - Or when you have to bear with a spouse who is hard to get along with—you learn to love them when they are not so loveable.
 - Or perhaps it is what I spoke of before, obeying your mother by mopping the floor when that new video game has just come.

III. You simply need to engage in the struggle against sin for rest of your life as those who are risen with Christ.

- That is the subject of Colossians 3 & 4.
- A. He tells you to turn your mind to the reigning Christ!
1. Christ has authority over those dominions and principalities and power.
 - There He is, reigning at God's right hand—see Him there:
 - Col 3:1-4: **If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on**

things above, not on things on the earth. ³ **For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.** ⁴ **When Christ *who is* our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.**

2. Look to Him and not to all the extra things.
 - Get on with serving Him in the trials of life rather than trying to find ways to escape the trials.
 - Again, you can pray for deliverance;
 - You can get medical help for real medical problems and you can and should try to avoid dangers and injuries.
 - But don't look to something in place of Christ—some way to get spiritual power or sanctification apart from Him and His ordinances.
 - You will end up cheating yourself, defrauding yourself of Christ and of producing fruit for eternity through Him.

B. What you need is plain old sanctification—

- To put to death the sin (3:5-11) and to put on the new way of life in Christ (3:12-17).
 - That is what we concentrate on when we come to Christ alone and rest in His sufficiency.
 - Instead of trying to gain mastery so that we do not have struggles and trials in life, we focus on growing in our obedience to God...on learning obedience through suffering like Jesus did.
 - We recognise that we are in Christ, and that we are in His care as the one who brings us through hardships that we might grow.
1. Putting to death the sin is described in 3:5-11...
 - Verse 5 says: **Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.**
 - And then verse 8 and 9 say: **But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another since you have put off the old man with his deeds.**
 - Obviously, all of these are things that are not good.
 - God wants you to eradicate all of these from your life—because you love Him and because you are risen with Christ.

➤ But it does not end there!

2. In Christ, we not only must eradicate sin, we have also put on the new man that is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him that created us.
 - Verses 12-17 speak of the progress we are to make in putting on the new life:
 - a. First, that we are to love one another, again, not because everyone always treats us well, but rather even though they don't:
 - 3:12-14 say: **Therefore, as *the* elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering;** ¹³ **bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also *must do*.** ¹⁴ **But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.**

- b. And then we are told to let the peace of God rule in us and to be thankful, encouraging one another about our Saviour and His excellence.

Col 3:15-17: And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. ¹⁷ And whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

3. And we are told to live all of this out in ordinary relationships.
- We are not called to some sort of isolation or abstinence from family or from work as some of those were advocating who were calling for something in addition to Christ.
 - No, in Colossians 3:18 – 4:1,
 - Paul calls for wives to submit, husbands to love their wives without bitterness, children to obey their parents, fathers not to provoke their children, servants to obey their masters, and masters to provide well for their servants.
 - We are not looking for a higher spiritual life, but for a godly everyday life in Christ Jesus our Saviour... in this broken sinful world where life is hard.
 - We learn to love in a fallen world.
 - We are being brought out of a ruined world to understand the worth of God and to learn to put obedience to Him above comfort.

C. And our prayer must be that the kingdom of Christ will increase.

1. We are to pray earnestly for our own growth...that we have just been talking about:
 - 4:2: **“Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving;”**
2. And we are to pray for those like Paul who preach the word—that they will continue to preach Christ (not all the extra things)...
 - 4:3-4: **meanwhile praying also for us, that God would open to us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am also in chains, ⁴ that I may make it manifest, as I ought to speak.**
 - Remember what the mystery is: it is Christ in you the hope of glory. He is the pathway to glory, not angels or rituals...
3. And finally, he exhorts that you to live in a way that commends the gospel to those who are still outside of Christ.
 - He speaks of that in verses 5-6: **Walk in wisdom toward those *who are outside, redeeming the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.***
 - The rest of the letter is full of greetings to and from the mutual friends that Paul has with the Colossians.

Conclusion: Clearly, the focus of this epistle is that Christ is all we need.

- Do not think that hardships show that something is missing.
 - No indeed—the Christian life in this world is a struggle.
 - Don't listen to those who want to add something to Christ that promises to eliminate the struggle and the sufferings.

- Jesus has full authority over all the powers that be and will use them for our benefit until He calls us to glory at the appointed time.
- Until then, we are to learn to serve Him faithfully when it is hard, just as He Himself learned to do.
 - We have His grace and power at work in us to do that... to put off the old man and put on the new man.
 - Then, after our work here is over, we will go to be with Him in glory.
 - Christ in you, the hope of glory.