

Colossians: Complete in Christ

Why study the book of Colossians? To answer that question, turn with me in your Bibles to Laodiceans 1:1. Laodiceans, the letter of Paul to the church at Laodicea, is one of the “prison epistles,” the letters Paul wrote while imprisoned at Rome. Besides Laodiceans, this group includes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. What Paul says to the church at Laodicea sheds some light on his letter to Colossae...

There’s a problem, isn’t there? There is no book of Laodiceans in the Bible – but there was a letter to them from Paul. Colossians 4:16, “When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter *that is coming* from Laodicea.”

Which raises an interesting thought regarding inspiration. If the letter to Laodicea was inspired, would it have been protected? Since it wasn’t protected, was it not inspired?. But for all that, we are more interested in what it says about the import of Colossians.

Some New Testament letters were written because of the centrality and importance of the city, such as Romans and Ephesians. These cities were major population and trade centers, literally the heart of the Roman Empire. Obviously offered a huge opportunity to witness over some tiny, isolated hick town in the hills of Asia Minor. Which is exactly what Colossae was. Or rather, had become.

At one time, the main road from Ephesus to the Euphrates ran right thru Colossae. Armies, trade, travelers all had to go thru Colossae, 4th & 5th century historians Herodotus & Xenophon called it “a great city,” and “populous, wealthy, and large.”

But the road was re-routed, bypassing Colossae, and by the time Paul wrote it was no more than a small agricultural town, far outstripped by its closest neighbors, Laodicea and Heiropolis, 12 miles away.

In 61 a devastating earthquake hit the area, destroying all 3 towns. Laodicea and Heiropolis were rebuilt, but Colossae never was. It is never referred to in Christian or secular documents after 61. Its location is known, but to this day the site has never been excavated because no one thinks it’s worth the trouble. Nothing significant is known to have occurred there.

Which begs the question: Why Colossians? If Colossae was to Rome what Greenville, TN is to New York (no offense, Greenville), why was it singled out to receive an inspired letter from the Apostle? If the city itself was destroyed literally within months of receiving the letter, and if the letter to the much more significant and surviving city of Laodicea, written at the same time by the same Apostle is lost to us, why did God preserve Colossians?

The answer becomes clear when we understand what the letter is all about. Here is Colossians in a nutshell, starting with the reason Paul wrote:

False Teaching at Colossae. Paul tells us his reason for writing in 2:1-4, "For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. **I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.**"

He writes to achieve these things because there is a false teaching that threatens the little church at Colossae. Most commentators call it "the Colossian Heresy." The problem is, we can't be sure exactly what it was.

Reading the New Testament is sometimes like listening to someone on the phone. You're not quite sure who they're talking to or exactly what they're talking about. You only hear half the conversation, and have to guess the rest. The pieces aren't filled in until they get off the phone. We don't yet have the luxury of asking Paul, "Who was that? What was that all about?" So we have to piece clues together from the subjects he addresses.

The false teaching was persuasive (2:4). It must have seemed logical and rational, but in reality it was empty, deceptive, worldly, and opposed to Christ (2:8). It included legalism & ritual (2:16-17), false humility and mysticism (2:18-19), and asceticism (2:20-23).

The false teaching didn't deny Christ, it devalued him by elevating these other things. It said that Christ alone was not enough, that Christians need Christ *plus* something more. Paul responds strongly and seriously. Christ *plus* anything is no small matter.

How does this fit with the book as a whole? Colossians is all about the answer to and antidote for the Colossian heresy. It is the most Christ-centered book in the Bible.

The theme is the pre-eminence of Christ and his sufficiency not only for salvation, but for life. Christ is completely sufficient for every spiritual & practical need, and Christians are complete in him.

Colossians can be divided right in two, with chapters 1 and 2 focused on the **supremacy** of Christ and chapters 3 and 4 focused on our **submission** to Christ.

C1-2, Supremacy of Christ. After his customary greeting (v1-2), Paul opens with a prayer for the Colossians, thanking God for their faith & love (1:3-8), praying ceaselessly for their knowledge & walk (1:9-14). Proclaiming the major theme of the pre-eminence of Christ (1:15-23), Paul says his mission is to "present every man complete in Christ" (1:24-29).

In 2:1-23, Paul underlines the importance of the truth in light of the false teachers who seek to delude and deceive believers and defraud them by promoting false humility and mysticism.

C3-4, Submission to Christ. The second half of this letter is all about putting chapters 1 and 2 into practice, living complete in Christ by first, setting minds on things above (3:1-4), second, putting aside all that belongs to worldly system and third, putting on the new self (3:5-11).

This has practical implications for how you live your life in relation to the church (3:12-17), to your spouse (3:18-19), to your children & parents (3:20-21), and to your employers and your employees (3:22-4:1).

Finally, living complete in Christ will have an impact on your relationship to non-Christians as well, praying for them and for wisdom in living among them with a view to their salvation (4:2-6). Paul closes the letter with some important information about his partners in ministry (4:7-18).

Do We Need Colossians? If Colossians is concerned with heretical teaching, why do we need it? Are we in danger of the same error? In a word, yes! The idea that there is “something more” has always been the church’s error.

We either think that we need Christ plus something more to be saved, or we need Christ plus something more to live saved. Colossians addresses both.

John MacArthur, in *Our Sufficiency in Christ*, cites 3 common errors of the church today:

- Reliance on psychology over Scripture. We have fallen prey to the notion that sharing Scripture & praying is not enough, that people’s hurts need psychological technique, that therapy is more practical than understanding Christ’s sufficiency
- Reliance on formula, program over the Holy Spirit. We have fallen prey to the notion that spiritual results can be obtained by human methodology. We equate external success with spiritual success. The early church’s reliance on the apostle’s teaching, prayer, fellowship, and the Lord's Table has given way to seeker sensitive, purpose-driven, entertainment.
- Reliance on mysticism, emotionalism over sound doctrine. “What does the Bible mean to me?” has become more important than “What does the Bible mean?” The prevalence of signs and wonders, and the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel are all aspects of this.

Note, I’m not condemning all psychology, all programs, all mysticism. I am encouraging Christians to take a very hard look at our reliance on these things and their priority in our lives.

We need to understand Colossians and our sufficiency in Christ, because we live in a hurting world, don’t we? We’ve seen the loss of jobs; death of spouses and children; lives consumed in wasting sickness. We’ve seen marriages strain, sometimes to the breaking point, and sometimes crack

How do we cope? One thing is sure, human wisdom can't provide the resources we need for daily life. The good news is that we don’t have to rely on human wisdom, strength. The one resource is ours already, *Christ, alone*. That is the message of Colossians.

And if we understand that truth and all that it means, our hearts will be encouraged, we will be knit together in love, we will have full assurance of understanding, and the true knowledge of Christ, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

A Walk that Pleases God, 1:1-12

We saw in the introductory lesson that Colossians was written to counter false teaching that something more than Christ is needed, Christ *plus* something. To counter that, Colossians is focused on the sufficiency of Christ.

We can sum up the whole book in 3 words, “complete in Christ.” In this study, we'll get into the first 12 verses, Paul's prayer for the Colossians that their walk would please God. As we open the Scripture, you are going to see how you can have a life that pleases God.

Greetings, v1-2

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. " (Colossians 1:1-2, NASB95)

This letter is from Paul, an apostle by God's will. This is a statement of Paul's God-given authority. The entire letter is to be received as God's word, not man's. But not just Paul, "and Timothy," who was with Paul under house arrest in Rome. "To the saints and faithful brethren...grace to you and peace from God."

This is Paul's "standard" greeting. Hello from Paul, favor (grace) from God.

Paul's Prayer, v3-12

Paul begins this letter with a two-part prayer. Included are themes common to other prayers in other letters, especially Philippians, another prison epistle.

- 1) Thanksgiving for the result of the gospel in the Colossians lives and
- 2) Prayer for knowledge that results in a walk that pleases God.

This isn't a stock prayer, it is insight into Paul's heart, what he values. It is also insight into what we need to live a pleasing life.

Thanksgiving for Faith, Love, and Hope, v3-5a

"We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.." (Colossians 1:3-5, NASB95)

Paul says that *every time* he prays for the Colossian believers, he thanks God for them because of 1) their faith and 2) their love, and third grace, in v5, their hope. Note the relationship here: Their hope is the source of their faith and love.

If faith in Christ and love for the saints comes from our hope, we'd better understand what our hope is. There are two dimensions to biblical hope, one is internal, the other external. Internal hope, the hope within us, is based on the external hope without.

Christian hope is, simply put, the hope of heaven, the realization and fulfillment of our ultimate salvation. It is the hope of the return of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory.

Titus 2:11-13, "*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus,*"

Further, our hope is that when he is revealed in glory, we will be too. Colossians 1:27 calls Christ "the hope of glory." 3:4 says, "When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory."

But Christian hope is not simply wishing. Wishing has a certain fantasy quality to it. Hope is the confident expectation of an outcome that you cherish. That is the hope without. The hope within is the settled confidence that the external, objective hope of Christ's return is absolutely true.

We tend to think of hope as being grounded in faith. We say "because I believe I hope." But Paul is saying that biblical faith is grounded in biblical hope, "Because my hope is real, I believe." The point is, hope is not dependent on me, it is outside me.

Hebrews 6:18-19, "*so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil,*"

Hope is based on God's promises, not my faithfulness. Because of that it is certain, an "anchor of the soul." It is for that reason the source of their faith and love.

Faith, hope, and love are commonly grouped in the New Testament:

- 1 Thessalonians 1:3, "*constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father*"
- 1 Thessalonians 5:8, "*But since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.*"
- 1 Corinthians 13:13, "*But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.*"
- Hebrews 6:10-12, "*For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the*

saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises."

Note two things in v5. First, where does Paul say our hope is? "laid up for you in heaven." It is stored away like money in the bank. It is sure, like an ironclad contract. It is protected, where no power or corruption can touch it, as Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-20,

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;"

Second, where did the Colossians learn their hope? From the "word of truth, the gospel," v5b-6. Paul now puts the gospel at the center of his thanksgiving.

On account of the Gospel, v5b-6

"of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; " (Colossians 1:5-6, NASB95)

The gospel is characterized as:

- True (word of truth, 5b)
- Universal (in all the world, 6a)
- Effective (bearing fruit and increasing, 6b)
- Gracious (grace of God in truth, v6c)

While all that is true, for the gospel to bear fruit we must cooperate with it. The gospel not some lump of magic wisdom that expands without us us interacting with it. What do we have to do for the gospel to bear fruit in our lives?

What kind of words does Paul use to describe the Colossian's reception of the gospel? Look at v6: they heard it and understood it. To produce fruit, the gospel must be heard, v5, understood, v6, and in v7, learned. In other words, an ever-deepening understanding.

The gospel is both dynamic and personal, and it makes demands on us. We must hear it first, and hearing it, we must understand it and learn it. The result is an active faith and obvious love.

From the world's perspective, the gospel is foolishness believed by a motley handful of rejects. In reality, it is an uncontrollable power unleashed in tiny groups of believers meeting in homes through the ancient world, working quietly but powerfully.

How did this gospel reach Colossae?

Brought by Epaphras, v7-8

"just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit. " (Colossians 1:7-8, NASB95)

They learned the gospel from Epaphras, not Paul. That name is short for Epaphraditus, but probably not the same man as in Philippians. Epaphras was a common Greek name, like Jonathan or Edward today.

Most likely Paul met Epaphras while he was at Ephesus (for 2 years, Acts 19:1, 10). This is probably where Epaphras was saved, and he may well have been sent by Paul to take the gospel deeper into Asia while Paul remained as pastor at Ephesus, 110 miles away.

Paul tells us in 2:1 that he has never been to Colossae. Epaphras evidently had similar responsibility at Laodicea and Heiropolis, 4:13. He is a first century circuit rider!

How does he describe him in v7? “beloved,” “fellow bond-servant,” “faithful servant of Christ.” As an apostle, Paul might have taken the stand that he alone was qualified to preach and teach, but he did not. He might have considered himself Epaphras’ superior, but he did not. He thought of him as a fellow servant of Jesus Christ.

So, Paul thanks God because for this little group in the little town of Colossae., that understanding God’s grace in all its truth taught them about their hope, which in turn prompted their faith and love.

Key truth: *Faith and love spring from hope, which comes by hearing, understanding, and learning the gospel.*

Request for Knowledge that Results in Action, v9-12

"For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light." (Colossians 1:9-12, NASB95)

The content of Paul’s request is that the Colossians would be “filled w/knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” Note the word “filled” in v9. What does it mean to be filled w/something?

Examples of the filling Paul is praying for are found in Ephesians 5:18, where Paul commands Christians to be filled with the Spirit; John 12:3, where the room is filled with the perfume when

Mary anoints Jesus with the perfume; and Acts 2:2, when the house is filled with the noise of the Spirit's coming.

In all cases, when the objects above are said to be filled they are totally dominated by the thing doing the filling. When we are filled with something, we are totally dominated by it.

That is Paul's prayer, that we be totally dominated by "the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Knowledge, wisdom, and understanding: three related words, similar, though not exact in meaning. Together, they indicate a totality of spiritual insight: full, intimate knowledge, insight into true nature of things, and the faculty of intelligent comprehension.

Paul is not lauding knowledge for its own sake, as if all Christians must be major intellectuals. He is saying that knowledge of a specific kind and of a specific subject is incredibly important. Specifically, "of His will."

Not about decisions regarding circumstances, where to live, what job to take, etc., but knowing God's will as to how to live in all situations, no matter your circumstances (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:17; Phil. 1:9-11.)

There are several things to note here: Who gives such wisdom? God does, that's why Paul is praying for it. How does God build such knowledge in us? One thing is sure, he doesn't drop it whole into our brains. Instead, he uses a combination of supernatural insight, familiarity with Scripture, and experience. Gaining spiritual wisdom is usually a painful, long-term prospect.

What is the result of being filled with such knowledge? The worthy walk in v10, which is the purpose for the prayer, a walk that is "worthy of the Lord," a walk that pleases him "in all respects"

There are 4 marks of a worthy walk in v10-12:

- Bearing fruit in good works;
- Increasing in the knowledge of God, knowing him better as we are obedient to the knowledge we've already received;
- Strengthened with God's power. This is how the worthy walk is achieved, through his power, not ours. It is according to his "glorious might," which is more than adequate, "for all steadfastness and patience," able to meet all trials, and persevere in the walk;
- Joyously giving thanks to God because he has made us fit for a share in the inheritance of the saints.

How do you get this way? How do you live a life characterized by fruitfulness, ever-growing knowledge and strength, characterized by joyful thanksgiving?

It starts with what you know, back to v9 and being filled with the knowledge of God's will. Not simply book-learning, not just experience, but "filled with," totally dominated by the knowledge of God's will, in all spiritual wisdom, understanding.

Key truth. *Being filled with knowledge, spiritual wisdom, and insight, results in a life that is pleasing to God.*

In both of these key truths there is a strong connection between ***knowing*** (faith, hope), ***understanding*** (word of truth, God's grace, his will, spiritual wisdom & knowledge), and ***doing*** (love, worthy walk, pleasing, bearing fruit, increasing, strengthened, giving thanks).

Want to live a pleasing life? Want to experience victory over sin and ineffectiveness as a Christian? Then consider these questions:

- What level of importance does knowledge, wisdom, understanding have in your life? Are you filled by it?
- Are you in the word daily? If so, how much time and how much effort do you put into it?
- How much time do you spend praying for it? How much do you depend on God for every circumstance?
- Are you willing to put yourself in uncomfortable situations so you have to depend on him?

Our Great Redeemer, Colossians 1:13-23

We've seen Paul's thanksgiving for the Colossians, for their faith & love based on their hope (v3-8). We've seen Paul's prayer (v9-12) that they be filled with the knowledge of God's will, so that they may walk worthy. And we said that the definition of a worthy walk is one that pleases the Lord in all respects, bearing fruit, increasing in knowledge, being strengthened, joyously giving thanks.

What comes next is an expansion on our inheritance, from v12. This passage also begins to address some of the false teaching at Colossae, teaching that claimed Christ alone was not enough to save.

This passage is also a hymn of praise to Christ the Redeemer, in 3 parts: The Redemption, v13-14; the Redeemer, v15-20; and the Redeemed, v21-23.

The Redemption, v13-14

"For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. " (Colossians 1:13-14, NASB95)

Our redemption is characterized as a deliverance from one kingdom and transference to another. We have literally been "rescued." When someone says they were rescued, what does that tell you about where they were? Not a good place! In this case, we were trapped in the "domain of darkness."

"Domain" is literally "kingdom." Before Christ, we were in someone's kingdom, and it was a terrible, dark place. We needed to be rescued because we couldn't rescue ourselves! We were so

associated with the dark kingdom that as far as God was concerned, we were darkness itself. Ephesians gives more detail on what we were when we were in this dark kingdom:

"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest." (Ephesians 2:1-3, NASB95)

"So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit," (Ephesians 4:17-22, NASB95)

In short, before Christ, we were dead, under Satan's rule, indulgent, children of wrath. Futile, darkened, excluded, ignorant, hard, callous, given over. In a word, we were totally corrupt. (Okay, that's 2 words).

That was before Christ. Not a pretty picture. We need to keep in mind that when we say someone is "lost" we mean *lost!* It is no small thing to be without Christ. And every person in God's creation is either under Christ or under Satan. The dark kingdom's dark king. Picture yourself a prisoner in Nazi concentration camp, only infinitely worse.

But God has rescued us from that dark kingdom. Notice, what tense is the verb in v13? *Past tense*, it is an already accomplished fact, if you have confessed Jesus as your Lord. At the point of your salvation, you were literally rescued from Satan's kingdom of darkness and taken captive to the kingdom of God's beloved Son. From the kingdom characterized by darkness, Satan's rule, to the kingdom characterized by what? Love, under the beloved Son's rule.

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;" (1 Peter 2:9)

"For you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light." (Ephesians 5:8)

Ephesians 2:4-7 begins with the two greatest words in Scripture, *"But God," "being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."* (Ephesians 2:4-7, NASB95)

We were dead in our sins, but God, rich mercy, great in his love, made us alive, raised us with Christ, and as if that wasn't enough, seated us positionally with Him in heaven.

God's beloved Son is our redemption, summed up in the truth of v14, that in Christ we have *the forgiveness of sins*. You've been rescued from that concentration camp. Would you ever go back? Of course not, but continuing to indulge our sin in just like that.

More than mere liberation from the past, forgiveness sets us free for the present and the future, to walk worthy, so that those who were once darkness are now light, and can walk as light.

A change of kingdoms necessarily means a change of kings. And the king of our new authority is an amazing king! If the redemption is great, it means we have a great redeemer!

The Redeemer, v15-20

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven." (Colossians 1:15-20, NASB95)

This is the heart of the hymn, picturing Jesus as Lord of Creation (v15-17) and Lord of the New Creation, the Church (v18-20).

Lord of Creation, v15-17. There are several terms here that define and describe the Lord of Creation.

Image, v15. Not like man, "made in the image of God," Christ *is* the image of God. True, exact, flawless replica of God's nature. The author of Hebrews echoes that thought, "*And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power...*"

Jesus brings clarity to our hazy notions of the invisible God. Who he is, the Creator and Redeemer. What he is like, merciful and loving. What he does, sends his Son to rescue his lost creation.

Firstborn, v15. This term is often misunderstood because we use "firstborn" to describe the first child born in time. Some (including the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses) say this means that Christ was the first created being. It is true the word implies first in time, but more often it is used to describe someone who is first in position, in status:

Genesis 27:28ff, Esau was born first, but Jacob became the firstborn.

Psalm 89:27, the Psalmist defines the term, speaking of David (not the first born of his family), and of Messiah: "I also shall make him My first-born, The highest of the kings of the earth."

To say Christ is the firstborn of all creation is to distinguish him from that creation. He is supreme over creation, not within it. The next statement makes that clear, v16.

Creator, v16. Jesus is supreme over creation because he is the creator!

"All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. " (John 1:3, NASB95)

"God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. " (Hebrews 1:1-2, NASB95)

Jesus created everything – in heaven, on earth, visible, and invisible. Whether this world, the galaxy, or the universe we can see and the one we can't. "Thrones, dominions," etc. were ancient terms for spirit beings, good and bad.

Jesus power is seen in the immensity of his creation. Consider its magnitude:

- Sun, 93 million miles away, could hold 1.2 million earths, plus 4.3 million moons.
- The next nearest star is more than 200 million miles away
 - Betelgeuse, 880 quadrillion miles away, is bigger than earth's orbit!

He is the Lord of creation. Do you think he had any problems turning water to wine? Healing the lame? Making you a new creation?

Not only is he the creator, but he is the rhyme and the reason of the creation. *"All things have been created through Him and for Him."*

Sustainer, v17. He didn't leave the creation to fend for itself. Christ holds it together, sustains it. Someone has said he "keeps the cosmos from becoming chaos." Consider:

- Earth's rotation. Any faster and we'd burn up. Any slower, and we'd freeze.
- Earth's temperature and distance from sun. Same as above, we are perfectly placed to sustain life.
- The moon's distance from us is what gives us tides, flood, and drought.

The universe is not self-sufficient. it needs Christ to hold it together, and so do we.

Lord of New Creation, v18-20.

"He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself,

having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. " (Colossians 1:18-20, NASB95)

This is the Cosmic Christ, supreme over creation, yet not aloof, the One who comes down to earth where his blood flows from his body, hung on a cross. He is supreme over the New Creation, the church. There are three terms in v18, that show his supremacy.

Head. He is the source of life. The image of the body in the New Testament is often focused on the relation of its members together, as in Romans 12:4-5, "*For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*"

Here, the focus is on the church's dependence on Christ as its head. In the image of a living body, it is the head that directs, governs, gives life and strength (see Ephesians 4:15-16 and Colossians 2:19).

Beginning. He is the chief of the church, the primary one, the leader.

Firstborn. Here's that word again. Was Jesus the first person ever raised from the dead? No, in fact there were several that came out of the grave before Jesus ever went in. Again, "firstborn" doesn't focus on first in time, but first in priority. Jesus was first in rank raised from dead.

He is the Head, the Beginning, the Firstborn, so that he might have first place in all.

Fullness, v19. No partial embodiment, all the fullness of God dwells in him. As in "image," all God's attributes and activities, Spirit, word, wisdom, and glory, are disclosed in him.

Reconciler, v20. The one who is the fullness of God is the one who reconciles man to God. And that's incredibly important because only God could fully reconcile man.

To the world, Jesus' crucifixion was the death of an obscure Jew on some little hill in a Roman backwater. In reality, it was the event that reconciles heaven and earth. Note, creation centers on Christ (in, thru, and for, v16). Reconciliation also centers on Christ (in, thru, and to, v19-20). He is the rhyme and reason for creation and reconciliation.

The Redeemed, v21-23

"And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach— if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. "
(Colossians 1:21-23, NASB95)

Paul closes this hymn of praise by considering:

What we were, v21. Alienated, hostile, engaged in evil.

What we are, v22. Reconciled, holy, blameless, beyond reproach.

We are reconciled, but not by anything we've done, only through Christ who knew no sin that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). When God looks at you he sees the righteousness of Christ, even though in your daily life you are still a work in progress.

What we must be, v23. This is our part in the deal. We must cooperate with God and the Holy Spirit. We must remain in the faith, firmly established, steadfast. If we abandon the faith and seek another avenue to God, we wind up dislodged from our hope, and then God only knows the genuineness of our professed salvation. As can be seen in Hebrews, the only outward proof of salvation is continuance in the faith.

The picture in Colossians 1:15-23 is of us going from totally lost to totally redeemed. Really big sin, really big Savior. Consider this:

- If Christ is the image (v15) and the fullness of God (v19), we won't find God anywhere else.
- If all things in heaven were created by Christ (v16), then Christ is stronger than any supposed threat by any supposed power, whether man or demon.
- If God's plan was reconciliation in, to, thru Christ, then there is no other salvation plan, and no other place to find peace with God.
- If Christ is supreme over the church, then connection with him is absolutely essential for individuals and churches. Those who lose contact with him will wither and die.
- If Christ is supreme over all, then he is sufficient for all. No challenge by anyone else can shake our hope in Christ.
- Finally, if Christ can sustain the universe, then he can sustain me!

The Marks of a True Minister, Colossians 1:24-2:5

As we saw in 1:23, Paul ended his hymn of praise to Christ by reminding his audience that he is a minister of the gospel of Christ.

The Greek word translated "minister," *diakonos*, means deacon, or servant. This isn't the high view the Christian as an ambassador, as in 2 Corinthians 5. Nor is it the low view of the Christian as a bond-slave, as in Romans and elsewhere. Just a servant, a working man given a stewardship by God.

Paul is going to show us the marks of a true minister, what it really means to be a minister of Jesus Christ. There are 4 of them. A true minister of Jesus Christ rejoices in suffering, v24; recognizes his ministry is a stewardship, v25a; proclaims the mystery of the gospel, v25b-27; and struggles for his people, 2:1-5.

²⁴ *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.* ²⁵ *Of this church I*

was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God,²⁶ that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints,²⁷ to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.²⁸ We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.²⁹ For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.¹ For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face,² that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself,³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.⁴ I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.⁵ For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

A True Minister Rejoices in Suffering, v24. This is first on Paul's list, but would it be on ours? Paul was writing from prison in Rome. Why does he rejoice in his sufferings?

Because, he says, he is "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." But what is lacking in Christ's afflictions?

Some say it refers to Christ's redemptive suffering. Jesus did not pay for all sin, and so we need a bit more, specifically, the righteous acts and suffering of worthy saints like Paul on behalf of the church. This is the idea behind the Catholic church's "Treasury of merits."

But if that is what Paul meant, he is arguing against himself in the very same book. Check out Colossians 1:13-14, 19-22, 2:13-14 (and plenty of others verses: Hebrews 9:13-14, 27-28, 10:10, 1 Peter 3:18). If we are already fully reconciled to God in Christ, then Paul cannot mean redemptive suffering in 1:24.

The phrase translated "Christ's afflictions" can be translated as "afflictions *like* Christ's" or "afflictions *for the sake of* Christ," but neither of those explains what he means by "lacking."

Some say "Christ's afflictions" is a technical term for the Messianic woes of the last days, the Tribulation. They say that as we get closer to Christ's return, we suffer the afflictions that accompany the last days. Sounds okay, but the problem is there is absolutely no reference to such a term elsewhere, in or out of the New Testament.

Maybe we can answer the question "what is lacking" by considering this question: Is there any Scriptural evidence that the church will suffer? Yes!

- Acts 14:22, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom"
- Romans 8:16-17, we are joint-heirs with Christ of all things, including suffering
- 2 Corinthians 1:5-7, the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance
- Philippians 3:10, we have fellowship with his sufferings

This is important: the word translated "afflictions" in v24 is *thlipsis*, and it is never used of Christ's suffering on the cross. It means trouble, tribulation, or anxiety. So Paul is talking about the non-redemptive suffering, the tribulation, that comes from daily living in a fallen world. But what about "lacking?"

In 1 Corinthians 16:17, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus "supplied what was lacking" on the Corinthian's part. That's the same word as in Colossians.

In Philippians 2:30, Epaphroditus completes "what was deficient" in the Philippians' service to Paul. Again, that is the same word as in Colossians.

What was lacking in both cases? Their personal presence. Paul is not griping here, he is saying that Stephanas and company represented the Corinthians and Epaphroditus represented the Philippians to Paul. Their personal presence filled up that which was lacking from their respective churches. The same sense applies here.

The Church continually experiences the push of evil against it as Christ's representative, just as Christ himself felt it in his earthly life. Christ is now exalted in heaven, but his Body, the Church, continues to suffer affliction because of sin.

Now let's make it personal. How do you react to affliction? To pressure, anxiety? How did Paul react?

Paul rejoices that he is suffering, not because he likes it, but as part of the Body, the personal representative of Jesus Christ, he rejoices because it is a personal honor that goes along with the territory of being a minister of the church, v25.

A True Minister Recognizes Stewardship, v25a. According to v25, who made Paul a minister? God did. For whose benefit? The church's. How does the church benefit from Paul's ministry? By the preaching of the word of God. There are several things here that we need to understand.

First, the ministry, Paul's pastorate is not merely a vocation, something you choose as a career path. Ministry is given by God.

Second, the ultimate goal of the ministry is not for the minister. It isn't about position, community status, or whatever. It is for service to the church. Remember, "minister," *diakonos*, means "servant."

Third, ministry is a trust from God, a stewardship of his people. He loves his people, so ministers better make sure they carry out the trust well.

Finally, ministry at its heart is tied to the word of God. Paul's ministry was to "fully carry out the preaching of the word of God;" I like the NIV here, to "present to you the word of God in its fullness." Without the word, there isn't much to the ministry:

1 Timothy 4:13, "*Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.*"

2 Timothy 4:2, "*Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.*"

A True Minister Proclaims the Mystery, v25a-27. The heart of ministry is the message. Unfortunately, that is not the norm in many churches.

A well-known pastor, interviewed in a national news magazine, said he does not preach on old, stale Bible stories but on current issues, and peace and justice. The problem is, what standard can he use for judging such important matters if he ignores *the* standard? Those old Bible stories are what gives us our understanding of peace and justice. Seeing how God acted toward man in salvation history teaches us how to act.

Not much better is the preacher who may well believe and revere God's word, but he does not allow it to have center stage in his ministry. His sermons may focus on funny stories, poignant stories, or man's opinion rather than the Word. It is true, the minister's life must be oriented around people (which is after all what the church is made of), but without the rich content of the word in those dealings, it won't be what God intended.

Not so with Paul, v26. The content of Paul's ministry is the word of God, which he calls "the mystery" in v26. In 1 Corinthians 2:7, Paul calls the mystery, "God's hidden wisdom." Something that was hidden that is now revealed. It is a "mystery," literally a secret, because it was not foreseen in the Old Testament, as Paul says in v26, something "which has been hidden from the past ages and generations."

Don't miss the significance that what God hid **from his people** in the past "has now been manifested..." to whom? To "his saints." Who are they? A special group? An elite class of believers? No – just us believers, all of us.

Nor is the mystery just any truth. This is big. God hid this truth in order to reveal it to his saints. Why? Not because of how neat **we** are, but how neat **this truth** is, v27, "*to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"

The mystery is magnificent in every way, "the riches of the glory of this mystery..." "Riches" often describes the blessings of Christ (see Ephesians 1:7, 18, 3:8, 16), but here it describes the mystery. "Glory" in Scripture is usually reserved for God, but here it describes the mystery.

The mystery has been made known among the Gentiles. This would blow you away if you were a 1st century Jew. That God would hide truth from his people, okay, that's his prerogative. But to then reveal it to **Gentiles?** How could he? Obviously, he could because he is God. But there is more, he could and did because the mystery itself has direct bearing on the Gentiles.

What is the mystery? It is not that Gentiles would be saved. That was clear in the Old Testament (see Isaiah 9:1-2, 11:10; Hosea 2:23; Zechariah 2:10). The mystery is the manner in which the Gentiles salvation would come about, in the existence and nature of the Church, where Gentiles and Jews alike are on an equal footing before God. One body, composed of Jew & Gentile, male & female, slave & free. An entirely new creation.

And the heart of mystery is one central truth – ***Christ in you***. The Messiah was expected to be a conquering king, not a suffering servant. That he would live within his people, most of whom were Gentiles, was new. The reality of it is guarantee of our hope, salvation (Rom. 8:11).

The indwelling Christ is the center of the mystery. He makes what was once separated one (Gal. 3:26-29). It is this that Paul proclaims (v28-29).

The Purpose of the Proclamation: to present all complete in Christ, v28-29. Notice this: what does Paul proclaim in v28? *Christ*. To whom? *“Every man,” 3 times.* What about women? *Them too.* Paul uses a generic term that refers to humanity, men and women. The main point here is that Christ is proclaimed, not just to unbelievers, but to all. Christ himself is the content of Paul’s teaching to both the saved and the unsaved.

How does he proclaim it? Three ways: by *admonishing*; putting someone’s mind in the right order, correcting. This is not always reproving. Acts 20:31 says Paul admonished the Ephesians for 3 years. He didn’t yell at them the whole time, he warned, encouraged, and reminded; By *teaching*; instructing, giving truth in such a way that learning occurs; and *with all wisdom*; giving them the full counsel of God, spiritual discernment, God-given common sense.

All of this Paul does with a specific goal in view: “to present every man complete in Christ.” “Complete” is *teleios*, perfect, mature, a finished product. What do we need to be complete? *Christ alone!* What do we need to learn it? Scripture alone! Simple, right? Easy, right?

May be simple, but it is not easy. Paul describes his ministry as labor, striving. In fact, even Paul would be unable to accomplish it were it not for the fact that he is fueled by God’s mighty strength. Even Paul would be insufficient to the task on his own power. See 1 Corinthians 15:10; Philippians 2:13

The Word of Christ is central and defining to the Body of Christ. In his basic primers on pastoring, 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul told Timothy:

- “give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.” (1 Timothy 4:13). This is the full breadth of communication: reading, application, and detailed study.
- “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed...” How? By “handling accurately the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)
- The reason Scripture has such a central place in the ministry, and the minister must be diligent to handle it accurately, is because it is God’s word: “All Scripture is inspired by

God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16)

Scripture provides what we need: it teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains. Scripture is *living*. Any library, filled with the greatest collection of knowledge, becomes obsolete and dated in time, but not Scripture. 1 Petet 1:23, “you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God...the Word of the Lord abides forever.”

Scripture has a power of its own far beyond what the teacher brings to it. Hebrews 4:12 says “the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the the heart.”

That power comes from the fact that it is God’s word, and as God’s word, it is the means the Holy Spirit uses to teach and guide us. In Ephesians 6:17, Paul calls the Word the “sword of the Spirit,” the offensive weapon for protection in the spiritual wars. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13 it is the word that is the agent of change and maturing “which also performs its work in you who believe.” The Holy Spirit breathed it out, and the Holy Spirit uses it to make us more like Jesus.

It must be communicated, and it should be communicated in the way that best fits the need. It should be read, it should applied, it should be taught. In our teaching, stories, news, illustrations, personal testimonies should go towards illuminating Scripture, not ourselves. They should go for deepening our understanding of what Scripture says, not how we feel. God’s word should never be crowded by man’s opinion.

If the Word is central and defining, what place is there then for other emphases in the ministry of the church? For “social” issues? Pretty limited.

A True Minister Struggles for His People, 2:1. Paul wants the church to know how he struggles for them and for their neighbors, the Laodiceans.

Remember where Paul is writing from? *A Roman jail*. Yet he talks about his labor, his striving, his struggle. How do you suppose he is laboring on their behalf as he writes? How about through prayer?

Does the word “struggle” describe your prayer life? Probably, but for most of us, probably in a different sense. Paul struggled in prayer for the church because of his great concern. See 2 Corinthians 11:28.

Note also, had Paul ever even been to Colossae? No, yet he regarded it as his, part of the unity of the Body of Christ. We are all interconnected. We are not in a competition, but a new creation, Christ in us.

Paul's goal and struggle for the Colossians is for their hearts to be encouraged, that they would be knit together in love, that they would experience the riches of full understanding and knowledge of the mystery, Christ in them, and that they would be protected from delusions.

That is Paul's struggle for the Colossians as a minister, and that is what happens when Christ is proclaimed and his word is taught. Look at Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

The ministry of the Word leads the Body in ministry to one another. It is in Christ that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden, and nowhere else.

Complete in Christ, Part 1 – Colossians 2:6-10

Join us for a glance backwards 2,000 years at what I call "Epaphras' Lament":

*"Paul, I'm really having trouble and I don't know quite what to do. The believers at Colossae are totally confused. They are being told they aren't spiritual unless they eat certain foods and avoid other foods. That they have to celebrate specific holidays or they don't measure up. That with every new moon God expects us to dance in the streets that we made it through another month. On the other hand, they aren't supposed to do **anything** on Saturdays.*

"What's worse, people are competing for who is "most humble!" It seems like the worse you feel about yourself, the more godly you are. People are absolutely proud of how humble they are!

"And angels! We've got angels coming out our ears! Angel this and angel that! Angel books, angel dolls, angel plays. Talking to angels, walking with angels. We can't get enough angels! And you know what they say when you challenge them on it? 'I had a vision! God spoke to me and revealed that I had a guardian angel watching over me!' 'God told me that all Christians are to eat nothing but steamed vegetables and drink weak tea!' 'God revealed to me he wants all believers everywhere to howl at the full moon!' Paul, how in the world do you fight this stuff?"

That's our question today...how do we fight this stuff? Have you ever had a vision? Have you ever literally heard God speak to you (an audible voice, not the sense that he is leading you)? Has anyone ever told you they've had a vision? What do you do when someone describes a vision? How does it make you feel?

Are visions bad things? No, God has used visions extensively. See Acts 9:10ff, 16:9ff; 2 Cor. 12:1-9. God can communicate thru visions if he wants - he certainly did in the past. What about today? Biblically, we don't believe that visions is God's usual mode of speaking. Why? 2 Timothy 3:16: "*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;*"

God has spoken, fully and finally, in the Bible, his written word. So what about those who claim authority via visions?

Paul opened this letter by praying the believers there would be filled with the knowledge of his will so they might walk worthy (1:9-12). That idea of the Christian life as a walk returns in 2:6-7. These verses are pivotal. They summarize the gist of what Paul has said, and turn the letter toward addressing the false teaching that is the cause of this letter in the first place.

Walk in Christ, v6-7. Paul is going to address the false teaching at Colossae, but I think we can learn something by seeing **how** he does it.

"Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. "

Note the first sentence, "As you have received Christ...so walk." Some interpret that as "live the same way you were saved." In other words, you were justified by faith, therefore you must walk by faith. Maybe, but I don't think Paul mean's to compare the walk to our salvation, he is using our salvation as a reason for the worthy walk. "As you" = "because you." Since you received Christ as Lord, the logical result is what? *Walk in him.*

Paul gives four characteristics of that walk, 1) firmly rooted, 2) built up in him, 3) established in faith, and 4) overflowing with gratitude. Paul is describing the foundation of true Christian living. Let's look at his terminology in v7.

"Firmly rooted." This is a perfect tense verb, (a past action with continuing results). Paul isn't saying "You need to be rooted." He is saying "You already are rooted in Christ." It is already done.

How do we get rooted in Christ? By receiving him. Paul is going to go into much greater detail on this point in just a moment, but for now realize this: Being rooted in him is the foundation for the other three characteristics of walking in Christ. Without being rooted, what hope is there for the other three? None.

"Built up...and established." These are both present tense verbs. In other words, both result from being rooted in him. They are also both in the passive voice, meaning that someone else is doing the action, not the believers. Who is doing the action? *God is.*

"Overflowing with gratitude." This is in the active voice, which means that this is our action. Like rich greenery is a sign of healthy plant life, thanksgiving that overflows is the mark of healthy spiritual life. What effect does thankfulness have on your worries, fears and doubts? If you are overflowing with gratitude, what does it say about your sense of fulfillment? *That it is complete.*

Note, Paul begins to deal with false teaching by addressing truth first. He deals with true Christian character and its theological underpinnings before addressing the error at Colossae. I

would liken his approach to laying a foundation that he can build his corrective points upon. The other approach would have been to address it piecemeal. That might address the points, but it would not provide the larger view that understanding the whole foundation does.

For You are Complete in Christ, v8-15. Having addressed truth, he issues a strong warning in v8:

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ."

"See to it..." is also translated "be on your guard" (Mk 13:9), and "Watch yourselves" (2 Jn 8). We are being warned about something dangerous here. What is it? *Philosophy and empty deception*. "Philosophy" here is a general term for teaching, for rational learning, not just speculative systems of Greek or Roman thought.

Rather Paul has in mind to be on our guard against a certain kind of philosophy, one that he describes as "empty deception, according to tradition of men, according to elementary principles of world, rather than Christ." This philosophy stands opposed to Christ.

Because it is opposed to Christ, it is devoid of truth. It is hollow and empty, and has nothing to offer anyone except more emptiness. We are always taken in by appearances, and high sounding drivel can sometimes have the surface appearance of intellect and depth. But think of it as cotton candy. It may look pretty and taste sweet, but there's nothing there, and in the end you'll just rot your teeth out and gain weight.

It is empty because it is man-made, not God's truth. It is "according to the tradition of men," not supernatural revelation, not the person whom the Colossians had received, Jesus Christ.

It is empty because ultimately, it is of the world. The "elementary principles" are the basic components that make up a whole, like the letters of the alphabet, or the physical elements of the world (earth, air, fire, water).

It could refer to the "ABCs" of false teaching, but more likely it refers to the foundation of any false teaching in worldly, that is to say, ungodly, principles. It is instructive to note that the same word here translated "principles," *stoichea*, is also used to refer to demons and spirit beings who control the "elementary principles" of the world.

We are to be on guard against any teaching that is opposed to Christ, that is based on earthly, fallen human wisdom. Why? What is the danger? *Because it can, and will, take you captive. It will seduce you and carry you away.*

That is why it is so important that we be rooted in Christ, built up and established in him, and therefore overflowing with gratitude. It is not only right, but it is a protection against spiritual imprisonment. Do you know Christians who are spiritually imprisoned? Maybe some of you are in jail right now? What is the solution? *Christ, and Christ alone.*

Count the number of times the phrase “in him” or “by him” or “with him” occurs in v6-15. Something like 9 times? What does that tell you? *The Christian life is all about... Christ.* That emphasizes the truth of 1:28, *"We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ."*

We are complete *in Christ*. Paul is going to detail the reason why that is so in v9-15, showing what God has done for us in Christ. It is an amazing picture.

Sufficiency of Christ, v9-10. *"For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;"*

Contrast v9-10 with v8. Unlike empty philosophy, all the fullness of God lives in Christ. Paul reiterates the truth from 1:19 that Christ is fully God in human form.

Notice the tense in v9, "You have been made complete..." Past tense, not present, not future, but something that is already done. As a Christian, what do you lack? What do you need? *Nothing.*

Christ is the ultimate authority of all the universe, v10. Not man's tradition or the world's principles. That makes sense if Christ is God. Otherwise, even what Christ says would just be man's tradition or the world's principles, right?

If you truly understand this truth, that you are complete in Christ, how likely are you to be taken captive by false teaching of v8? *Not likely.* Conversely, if you don't know it, you are bound to be taken captive sooner or later.

In the next lesson, Paul moves from the sufficiency of who Christ is to the sufficiency of Christ's action on our behalf, v11-15. We will focus on what Christ has done for us.

Complete in Christ, Part 2 – Colossians 2:11-15

We saw in the previous study the sufficiency of Christ and our completeness "in him," a phrase that is repeated 9 times in v6-15. Unlike the world's empty philosophy, all the fullness of God lives in Christ. He is all we need. In this study, the text moves from who Christ is to what he has done as we consider the sufficiency of Christ's action.

In Christ we have been circumcised, v11; buried, v12; made alive, v13; and forgiven, v14; and he has disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities, v15. Note that in every case, the tense of each of these actions is past tense - each is already done, and was fully accomplished, at the cross.

Circumcised, v11. *"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;"* "A circumcision made without hands" refers to our spiritual circumcision by God, not man. It is "the circumcision of Christ," meaning the same kind of circumcision. It is not physical circumcision, as Paul makes clear, "made without hands." This is not the snipping off of a tiny piece of flesh, but the whole body. And the language is violent. The NAS' polite "removal" is literally "stripping off." He isn't talking about literal circumcision. Based on the next action in v12 (buried), Paul is talking about death (which is what usually precedes burial). But what death is he talking about? Look at Ephesians 2:1-3; if we were already dead, what needed killing?

"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. " (Ephesians 2:1-3, NASB95)

Paul elaborates on the same idea in Colossians 2. The first thing that died is our *unregenerate* selves, who we were without Christ. Picture your life as two volumes. The first volume closed when you became a Christian - everything from that point on is a different book. Volume I is closed and done with. The "body of the flesh" is our old unregenerate selves. John Stott says it is "Not my lower self but my former self."

It also refers to the body as the instrument of the flesh, controlled and empowered by our carnal impulses. What about it? It is "stripped off." Paul's point is that *our old self has died. Therefore*, as he will make clear, *we do not rely on the old things*. Those old things he will address in v16ff.

Buried, v12. *"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."* If you died, you needed a burial. How and when were you buried? In baptism. What if you've never been baptized? Does that mean you weren't buried? Since v12 also says you were **Raised** in baptism, does it mean you are still dead? Must you be baptized in order to be saved? And if so, isn't that salvation by works? That all depends on whether the baptism you are talking about is wet or dry.

There is no water in v12. "Baptism" can be a confusing word. It is a Greek concept with no real meaning in English. It was not translated from Greek to English, only transliterated. The word is used in several ways. It can mean physical baptism, the spiritual washing away of sins, and the filling of the Holy Spirit.

The root meaning of the word is to "immerse" or "dip", and is used of dyeing cloth. The point of the word is not so much the dipping as the dipping's result, *a total change of nature*. The dyed cloth becomes totally permeated with the dye. In the same way, the believer becomes one with the person of Jesus Christ. That is baptism at its most basic, not a water ceremony but a spiritual concept representing our *total identification* with Christ. That is why it is important to know that we are complete in him, that all the fullness of deity dwells in him, that he is head over all authority. Because we are one with him. What need is there for anything else?

According to 1 Corinthians 12:13, at the point of salvation all Christians are baptized in the Spirit, *"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."*

Water baptism is an outward, physical symbol of an inward, spiritual event. If you are a believer, even if you have not been water-baptized, you have been baptized already, symbolizing your spiritual burial and spiritual rebirth. Think of it as a kind of joyous funeral. We are identified with him, not the old flesh any longer, and so his death is our death, his resurrection, ours. (But

let me urge you, if you have accepted Christ as your Lord but haven't been physically baptized, take this step of obedience, commanded by Christ in Matthew 28:19-20.)

How did you get to take part in this death, burial and resurrection? "Through faith in the working of God," not by anything we have done, not by anything we could do, but by God's action, through faith. God's grace saves us, through our faith in Christ. There is no more important truth in Scripture. Read Titus 3:4-7, Ephesians 2:1-9.

Made you alive, v13. *"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."* Paul has already said we died, now he says we were already dead. In other words, when we died in v11, we were dying to something that was already dead, our flesh. So then, what did we have to offer God? Zero. **Yet**, even though we were dead in our sin, he made us alive and more.

Forgiven us all transgressions, v13-14. *"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. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him."* God has forgiven all our transgressions by canceling our debt, pictured as a certificate of charges.

Picture a court of law which has judged a prisoner and found him guilty. The charge, and his sentence, is written out and read to the courtroom, and the sentence is carried out. That was us. We had been tried and convicted before God as being guilty of sin. Were we wrongly convicted? Are we guilty of sin? Of course we are guilty. Romans 3:23 says "for all have sinned..." The sentence was death. Was it too stiff? Does sin deserve death? Of course it does, Romans 6:23, "the wages of sin is death."

Do you remember that Pilate placed the charge against Jesus on his cross? Matthew 27:37, "above his head they put the charge..." They used to take that written statement of guilt and nail it to the cross for all to see why the prisoner was being executed. God had every right to carry out that sentence, to put us to death and post high the certificate of our debt against for him for all the world to see.

But God, being rich in mercy, rather than carry out the sentence of death on us, which was hostile to us (is that ever and an understatement!), God took that certificate and nailed it to the cross. Our sin is paid for, but God the Son took it on himself at the cross. As a result, how many of our transgressions are forgiven? What about the ones you haven't committed yet? All sin, of all people, for all time, is paid for.

Disarmed rulers and authorities, v15. *"When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him."*

When our debt was paid, not only were our old selves dead and buried, not only were we raised with Christ and forgiven all our sin and our debt wiped away forever, but God also, by that act on the cross, disarmed the spiritual powers. "Rulers," *arche*, and "authorities," *exousia*, are words

commonly used in secular Greek documents to refer to spirit beings. He's talking about Satan and his demons.

What about them? They are already disarmed. Satan may still be roaming around, a strong foe, but he is already defeated. As I've said before, Hitler was effectively beaten on June 6, 1944, when the Allies landed at Normandy. But a whole lot of fighting took place until the final victory in May, 1945.

In the same way, Satan has had the ground cut out from under him, the effectiveness of his power and his weapons, based on our sin and guilt, have been taken away, because Christ has paid the price.

Based on all this, what is left for us to do with respect to our salvation? Nothing. It is an incredible picture of an incredible salvation? Do you see why being a Christian is so much more than where you sit on Sunday mornings?

All this has to do with our salvation. Our sanctification, living a "holy and blameless" life, is also rooted in Christ's work on our behalf and in God's grace. Not dead works, not a legalistic checklist of do's and don'ts. More on that in the next study.

The Deceitfulness of Legalism, Colossians 2:16-23

You can summarize Colossians to this point by saying that we are to walk in Christ, firmly rooted, built up in him, established in the faith, and overflowing with gratitude. We are not to be deceived by worldly philosophy, a way of thinking and living that stands opposed to Christ, because we are complete in Christ.

He is our ultimate authority, and his 's action on our behalf *is completely sufficient*. In him we are circumcised, buried, raised from the dead and made alive, and completely forgiven. There is nothing left for us to do with respect to our salvation.

And flowing right out of that truth that we are complete in Christ comes this in 2:16-23:

"Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence."

That first word in v16, "Therefore," points back to what Paul was just talking about. Because of all that Christ has done, because of all he is, because you are complete in him, "no one is to act as your judge..." "Let no one keep defrauding you..."

See what Paul has done by reviewing the incredible foundation all believers have in Christ? He's made it really obvious that the false teaching at Colossae, summarized in v16-23, is rubbish. There is much discussion among commentators of whether the false teaching is primarily Jewish, pagan, or a mixture of the two, but it doesn't really matter. At its heart it is nothing more nor less than Legalism, something that is always with us.

Paul shows the roots of legalism, and legalism's results.

Legalism judges based on externals, v16-17. The command in v16 is "Let no one judge." What are they judging? What you eat, drink, the feasts you participate in, the holidays (new moons) you celebrate, and what you do with your weekend.

Nothing has changed in 2,000 years, has it? The old saying, "I don't smoke and I don't chew and I don't go with girl's who do," is funny, but it is also how many of us want our kids to think. Do you go to R-rated movies, or do you lose your sanctification if you see anything beyond a PG? Or can you go to movies at all? How do you feel about Halloween? Santa Claus?

Phillip Yancey, in his book "What's So Amazing About Grace," tells the story of a missionary family for whom peanut butter was a sinful luxury, and so they measured their devotion to Christ, and other's devotion, by what they did with peanut butter. Absurd, yes, uncommon, no.

Paul's evaluation of all such false measurements of spirituality is in v17. These things are a "mere shadow," they are transient, trivial, and trifling. Where is substance found? In Christ, v17

Legalism cheats us out of our prize, v18a. The second command here is in v18, "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize..." First, we need to understand the prize Paul is talking about. It is our sense of completion in Christ, our understanding that all that we need for life and godliness are ours already. As Peter writes, "*His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.*" (2 Peter 1:3)

What do they use to defraud believers of that prize? Phony spiritual attainments, "delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind."

We see the same thing today in those who puff up their experience over Biblical truth. Perhaps an inappropriate emphasis on tongues or a so-called "second blessing." Perhaps in an emphasis on social involvement apart from a critical care that the truths of the gospel are communicated

along with basic human needs. Paul's evaluation is that these issues lead only to "puffing up" (NIV) the fleshy mind.

Most importantly, if these are our criteria for spiritual maturity, what does it say about our relationship to Christ? In v19, such a focus on phone externals means that we are cut off from the head, not in the sense of lost salvation, but we will have lost the source of all direction and strength. Face it, anytime you sever a head from its body, you're just going to get lots of blood, and death. No direction, no life.

Legalism is temporal, deceitful, powerless. v20-23. Paul brings the discussion legalism to a conclusion by asking the question in v20, "If you have died with Christ, why submit to such meaningless measurements of spiritual maturity? Why continue to put yourself under the authority of merely human principles, summarized as a list of do-nots? "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch."

Paul's evaluation in v22-23 is that all these legalistic measures are destined to perish. They are merely human, and have the mere appearance of wisdom, but only in self-centered religion. They are of no *actual* value against sin.

Anytime we place our emphasis on externals, judging another's spiritual maturity merely on what they do or don't do, you are simply using a false religious test, pandering to your pride while making a pretense of humility. That always diminishes and discounts the primacy, centrality, and sufficiency of Christ, and thus cuts one off effectively from him as your spiritual head.

Legalism is self-centered. It depends on what an individual can do in and of himself, not what he can do thru God's grace.

Legalism is self-confident. It depends on my effort and lowers God's standard of "be holy" to what I can do. Legalism puts my confidence in me, the one who is struggling to meet the standards, not the God who sets the standards and provides the way to meet them through his Son.

Unconsciously, even a believer can reject his need for Divine resources if he is mired in legalism. Who needs God's supernatural strength & enabling if you think you are already living an obedient life by your own terms?

Legalism robs God of his glory. All the glory in a legalistic system goes to me. Rather than God's standard, "be holy," legalism says "honor the New Moon." Legalism takes divine standards and lowers them to a level man can obey. The effect is to blind man to how impossible God's standard is, and his need for a Savior. So instead of a triumphant shout of "Grace alone!" legalism asks, "what have you done for God lately?"

That was the great problem of the Pharisees, making God's standard attainable by defining it down to petty legal rules. Jesus said their righteousness was not enough, *"For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 5:20) Also see Mark 7:1-13.

What then is the difference between legalism and discipline? Isn't it right not to handle, taste, or touch evil things? Hasn't God forbidden obedient Christians to take part in some things?

Absolutely, but the truth is, defining a godly life as merely the absence of outward evil is simply not enough. There is no value in legalism, but there is great value in discipline. The difference between the two is in its source and emphasis. Success in a legalistic system comes from you, and results in self-hatred and self-condemnation (Romans 7:21-25). Discipline is rooted in Christ's strength, not our own, and its emphasis is on pleasing Christ, not man.

And with that, Paul turns from this false confidence in one's self to true confidence in Christ, in chapter 3.

Confidence in Christ, Part 1 – Seeking the Things Above: Colossians 3:1-11

At the end of chapter 2, Paul says that reducing Christianity to a list of “do nots” (v21), is rubbish. That is what the false teachers at Colossae were doing. They taught an “augmented Christianity” that said you needed Christ, plus something more. In their case, Christ plus ritual (v16-17), Christ plus experience (v18). But being a Christian is much more than what you eat, drink, and celebrate. We only dilute Christianity by adding to it.

But look at chapter 3:

- Colossians 3:5, *"Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry."*
- Colossians 3:8-9, *"But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices,"*
- Colossians 3:12-14, *"So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity."*
- Colossians 3:18, 20, 22, *"Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord...Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord...Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord."*

What did Paul tell us about lists in 2:20-21? Yet here in chapter 3 is Paul's own list of do's and don'ts! Is he merely substituting the list he prefers? No. The false teachers at Colossae were saying you were made right by how you kept to the external stuff. What Paul is talking about here is discipline, not legalism.

Discipline flows from relationship w/God, doesn't define it. Discipline recognizes that in Christ you are already pleasing to God, and seeks to align practice with position. Where legalism trusts self, discipline trusts Christ.

Paul in chapter 3 is not giving a list of behaviors by which you buy Christ's acceptance, he is showing what a life that trusts Christ looks like. Such a life turns from confidence in self to confidence in Christ.

Paul's change of focus is immediately obvious. Remember the repetition of "in Christ," in 2:6-15? In 3:1-4, Christian life is lived "with Christ." It is there in the past tense, v1, "raised with Christ;" the present tense, v3, "life is hidden with Christ;" and the future tense, v4, "revealed with" Christ. Chapter 3's focus clearly places all the Christian's confidence in what Christ has done, is doing, and will do.

The first thing Paul says is that we need to set our minds, v1-4. "Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above." We need to seek, to search out, the things above. Paul goes on to say in v2, to "set your mind," on things above. We are to be intent upon heavenly things, not earthly things. What has he said is earthly, 2:8? Worldly philosophy. 2:20, 22? Legalism.

Instead of seeking those things, seek heavenly things. Why? Because that's where Christ is. Paul says he is seated, his work is finished, at the right hand of God, he is exalted. What does Christ's position have to do with how I live? That's v3, "For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

Paul says first of all that if you have been raised with Christ, set your minds on things above. Have you been raised? Sur, if you have trusted Christ as your Savior, 2:12-13. Then he says the same thing another way in v3: "you died..." Hold on, when did you die? At salvation, 2:11, circumcision is a metaphor for death. In 2:20, Paul says we died to the elementary principles of the world.

In Romans 6:3-6, we are baptized into his death, which means united with him in death, his death is ours. That only stands to reason: if we were raised, we must have been dead. So in Colossians 3:3 he is saying that when you died, your life was no longer an earthly life. You were no longer principally defined as of this world, but instead your life is now with Christ in God. As such, it is "hidden" from the world around us.

As such, it is a mystery to the world, they can't understand it. But more importantly, it is secure, hidden away in heaven with Christ. And that otherworldly, secure life is something that is ours now.

Here's a question: Is v3 talking about position or practice? Is this hidden life fully ours today? Yes, in position. If it were fully ours in practice, if we lived a perfectly clean life, you wouldn't need me to teach you. Eph. 2:6 echoes this thought. In position we are seated in heaven w/Christ. But we are all still here.

We struggle with sin and effectiveness now, but that won't always be the case, v4. When Christ returns in glory, then our new life will be fully manifested and fully ours – no more struggles with obedience, with desire, etc. So what do we do until then? We are to keep seeking, to set our minds, to focus, on heaven. And because that is the case, we must align our practice with our position as closely as we can, v5:

Put off the Old, 3:5-11. Therefore, because we died and our life is hidden, "consider the members of your earthly body as dead." Literally, "put to death." What kinds of sin is he talking about in v5? There are 5 terms listed here, and they are all sexual:

- Immorality, lit. fornication, Greek *porneia*. It is all-encompassing, and refers to any sexual relationship outside of marriage.

- Impurity, passion, evil desire – often used with *porneia*. Impurity is a general state of the mind and heart. Immoral, impure. "Passion" in the New Testament always refers to lust, leads to sexual sin. Evil desire is just that, a desire for what is evil.
- Finally, greed, or covetousness. It is a desire for what you don't have. Note what Paul says about greed – it is what? Idolatry? Why? Because it puts you in the place of the one who is to be worshipped. Your needs are to be met at all costs.

All of these terms for sexual sin have the same starting point. They all start with elevating your wants and needs, making yourself God, and appeasing yourself with sex.

Why are these things not appropriate for Christian? Because, in v6, of the wrath of God. They are characteristic of your old life, v7. But you died, so now put such deeds to death.

There is a second list of sins in v8-9a, "*anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices,*" All of these sins focus on anger, with an emphasis on angry speech. Sex and speech, two of our most powerful sin urges. What does James say about one who can control his tongue? They are mature, able to bridle whole body (James 3:2).

There is not a person around you who does not struggle with one of these sin areas or the other, or most likely, both. It is ongoing spiritual warfare. Because you died, put to death the deeds of the flesh. Lay them aside, v8 says, like a cheap suit of clothes you discard in the same way you discarded of the old self, v9.

Note v10, does it tell you to put on the new self? No, you already had it put on, at salvation.

These are "already, not yet" aspects of the Christian life, position vs practice.

The first half of Colossians is all about position, doctrine, who we are in Christ, and what he has done. The second half, beginning here in chapter 3, is all about our practice, how we are to live because of what he's done. And there is no way to match your practice with your position if you don't know your position.

This is not a powerless list of do's and don'ts. This is not taking off the bad without putting something far more powerful in its place, v10. You "have put on the new self..." you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. What if you have stumbled here? What if you, even as a Christian, are guilty of sexual sin? Of ungodly anger? Of abusive speech? Is there any hope for you? Lots.

First, you aren't you anymore. V10 says you are being renewed, lit. renovated. The tense Paul uses indicates continual action, something that is always going on. Think about that, God's renewal is continuous, constantly available. You can't outrun it, and you can't lose out on it. It is always there.

Second, v10 also says that our new self is being renewed in the knowledge of the image of our Creator. The NASB's "knowledge according to the image" is clumsy. Our best understanding is that Paul simply means we are being constantly made more like Christ. We are constantly, continually being renewed, renovated, made over from old selves to the image of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Who does that? He does.

Who gets this renewal? All believers, or a favored few? All of us, v11. Paul's list of opposite extremes is meant to be all-encompassing. For our culture, we could add "black/white." There is no place whatsoever for Christians to practice racial or class prejudice.

So what is the key to a disciplined life? How do we live obedient lives, with a proper focus on Christ, not self? The answer lies where Paul began this chapter, in Christ.

First, set your minds on him. How do you do that? It's all about your emphasis, where you spend your time. Make sure you are putting the right stuff in your mind in first place: God's Word.

"Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things." (Philippians 4:8)

Second, recognize and remember whose power gets the job done. Who is doing the renovating and renewing? God, not you.

Confidence in Christ, Part 2 – Put on the New: Colossians 3:12-17

Colossians 3 places all the Christian's confidence in what Christ has done, is doing, and will do for us. The Christian life is lived "with Christ," past, v1, "you have been raised with Christ;" present, v3, "your life is hidden with Christ;" and future, v4, "you also will be revealed with Him in glory." Clearly, we are to set our minds on heavenly things, not earthly, "For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (v3)

Therefore, because we died and our life is hidden with Christ, we are to "consider the earthly members of your body as dead to immorality..." (v5). The Greek there is literally, "*put to death* the earthly members..." The areas Paul names are the two strongest sin urges we know, sexual sin, v5, and sins of speech, v8. We are to put them to death because of the wrath of God, v6, and because they are characteristic of the old life, v7. Because we died with Christ, v3, we must now lay aside such deeds, literally shedding them like an old set of clothes.

Paul doesn't tell us to "lay aside..." without recognizing that something far more powerful is already in its place, v10, "the new self..." At salvation the old you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. We must recognize that truth, and recognizing it, live like it. Those who preached a legalistic righteousness said one had to follow a list of behaviors to please God. The reality is that because of what God has already done, because in Christ he is already pleased with us, we are to be disciplined in our behavior.

All the truths above apply not only to the individual Christian, but to the gathered church as well. In v12-17, Paul goes beyond the individual Christian's walk and talks of 3 characteristics that, because of who we are in Christ, are to distinguish the Church, the Body of Christ.

A Fellowship Dominated by Love, v12-14. As those chosen by God (v12) we are to choose our behavior. Contrast v10, where we take off the old, to v12, where we "put on" the new, like putting on new clothes. God has a whole new suit for you.

What do we put on? A new heart, Greek *splanchnon*, lit. "inner parts." This is the seat of emotion, particularly those relating to affection and love. Paul names 5 aspects, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Not coincidentally, all of these are things which are said to be characteristic of Christ's heart:

- compassion – Matthew 9:35-38
- kindness – Luke 6:35
- humility – Phil. 2:6-11
- gentleness – 1 Pet 2:23
- patience – 1 Tim 1:16

Now, compare those virtues to the "vice lists" of v5 and 8. They are diametrically opposed. Instead of immorality or anger, compassion. Instead of impurity or wrath, kindness. Instead of

passion or malice, humility. Instead of evil desire or slander, gentleness. And instead of greed or abusive speech, patience.

Good as they are, these things are not the end in themselves, but lead to the desired end, v13, “bearing with one another and forgiving each other.” In how many circumstances? All – “whoever has a complaint...” Christians can have complaints against one another? Unthinkable!

Ephesians 4:1-3, "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Patiently, humbly, and gently putting up with one another. Loving and accepting one another in spite of our all too obvious faults. What would our churches be like if all Christians were obedient to this command?

Note, Paul is saying there *will* be complaints, sometimes with good reason. What do we do with those? If we are putting on a heart of compassion, we will bear with those who offend us and forgive. Why? Because we too were forgiven, “just as the Lord forgave you...”

How will we do that? Wait until forgiveness is asked? That’s not how God did it. Ephesians 2:8-9 says "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)."

There is one virtue that goes above all others in v14, "beyond all these things." It is the crowning grace, love. It is to be the defining characteristic of Christ's church.

Why is this “beyond all these things?” Because you can’t demonstrate the other virtues without it. Without love, compassion, humility, kindness, are just dead, meaningless words. You might be able to fake it for a while, but you can’t do it for long, and you certainly can't fool God.

Love is to be a predominate characteristic of Christ’s people. John 13:34-35, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Paul calls the love he wants the church to put above all others the "perfect bond of unity" in v14. In other words, love joins a Colossians 3:11 people, a people of vastly diverse backgrounds into a new creation, one community. Where people love one another unity flourishes. Even when disagreements arise, as they always will, an atmosphere of love makes dealing with them a labor of love.

Hearts Ruled By Christ’s Peace, v15. This is the first of three Christ-centered commands. Here, dealing with the peace of Christ. In v16, dealing with the word of Christ, and in v17, dealing with the name of Christ.

The “peace of Christ” is the peace that is of or from Christ. It is the peace that Christ himself felt.

- John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.
- Philippians 4:6-7, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Peace is the second defining characteristic of Christ's church. And Paul says that this peace is to *rule in our hearts*. Get this picture: the word for rule is the same word often translated as judge, arbiter, or umpire. What does an umpire do? He enforces the rules. He doesn't make the rules, he follows them. In the same way, Christ's peace is to be the umpire, judging and controlling what we think, say, and do. It makes us ask the question, "Will this add to peace, or take away from it?"

The reason we are to let peace rule is because it is what we have been called to, "to which indeed you were called in one body."

The result of the peace of Christ ruling in our hearts is first of all, unity. We are "called in one body," and secondly, thankfulness, because we have been given such peace.

Note, the focus is not so much on us having peace in our lives as it is having peace in our fellowship. It is not merely an internal peace, it is also external. The peace of Christ is to rule in our hearts to such a degree that it controls what happens externally. If the peace of Christ rules in our hearts individually, it will rule in our fellowship collectively.

So love is to permeate our fellowship and peace is to rule our lives. The third characteristic of Christ's church is seen in v16.

Christ's Word Central to Everything We Do, v16. In Colossians 1:28, Paul said that the marks of a true minister was "admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ."

Now in v16, we see the same things: "with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another." Such godly ministry is not merely the province of the pastor, but it is every Christian's responsibility.

Using what? The word of Christ. Not only the word about Christ (the gospel) but word that is from Christ, God's Word, both Old Testament and New.

And Paul says we are to let that word "dwell" in our hearts. The idea is that it would be at home in our hearts. You see what it means for something to "dwell within" you in Romans 8.11, where Paul is describing the indwelling Spirit, "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."

The same idea is seen 2 Timothy 1.14 and 1 Corinthians 3:16. As much as we are indwelt by God's Holy Spirit, the Word is also to dwell in us *richly*.

That means abundantly, extravagantly. As God abundantly poured out his blessings upon us (1 Timothy 6:17; Titus 3:6; 2 Peter 1:11), we are to let the Word be at home in us.

What is the result when the word of Christ richly dwells within us? 1) teaching and admonishing with all wisdom. And 2) singing w/thanks to God

Note what is used to communicate the Word: psalms, hymns, spiritual songs. These are specifically musical forms. There is much speculation on the difference between the three forms, but form is not the issue.

The point is, we are to sing publicly and privately, with gratitude to God. And our singing must reflect the word of Christ.

There is an obvious relationship between Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-19, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord."

Some say they are equivalent, that to let the word dwell in you richly is the same thing as being filled with the Spirit. I don't think so, but the two are closely related.

"Filled" in Scripture always carries the meaning of "controlled." We can't equate filling heads with Scripture with filling hearts with the Spirit. We can't equate hours of study with the control of the Spirit. Said to say, many who spend hours in the Word don't seem to allow the Spirit much room to work.

But we are to be controlled by the Word, to submit to it, and let it be so deeply rooted within us as to control all our thinking and acting. In the same way, we are to submit to the Holy Spirit, allowing him to control our thoughts and actions.

And notice, three times in v15-17, we are told to be thankful. Think Paul is trying to communicate something here?

The Bottom Line: The Name of Christ is Upheld, v17. Paul finishes with a sweeping, inclusive command, "Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father."

What sphere of influence is left out? Words and deeds. Words also encompass thoughts, so nothing is left out. *Whatever you do*, do all in the name of Jesus, and be thankful about it. We represent Jesus, so everything we do should reflect Jesus: what he would do, why he would do it, and how he would do it.

Paul has described a church where the fellowship is dominated by love, people's hearts are ruled by peace, where Christ's word is central to everything we do, and where the name of Christ is upheld.

It is quite a list, but it is not a checklist for church membership, or else no one need apply. Instead, these virtues are evidence of transformation. Uneven application of these virtues is witness to the continued need for the Word to dwell richly within us.

Family Matters 1: Colossians 3:18-21

We saw in the previous lesson that the church of Christ is to represent him in everything they do, in word and in deed. Doing all in the name of the Lord obviously goes well past church relationships into every corner of our lives. 3:18-4:1 takes the command of v17 and applies it to three pairs of relationships, two are family-related, one is work-related.

Consider a couple of points before we dig in. First, because the Bible touches on real needs of real people, similar truths are often taught in more than one epistle. Little comes as close to home, literally, as family relationships do, so it is no surprise to find them addressed elsewhere. So, Peter writes in 1 Peter 2:13, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority." And from there, he goes into servant-master relationships (1 Peter 2:18), then wives and husbands (3:1-7).

Or Titus 2:1-10. Paul begins reminding Titus to "speak the things fitting for sound doctrine," then goes on to delineate those things as they related to older men and women, v2-3, younger women and men, v3-6, and slaves, v9-10.

The closest parallel to our text in Colossians is Ephesians 5:22ff. Most commentators think Paul wrote Ephesians and Colossians around the same time. Just at first glance between the two passages, notice that Ephesians generally says more about these relationships, and Colossians is a bit briefer.

The difference is there is more detailed reasoning for the commands in Ephesians than in Colossians. Does that mean these relationships were less problematic in Colossae than Ephesus? That is possible, but certainly not probable, if personal experience with every married couple or parent-child relationship I've ever known holds true.

We all struggle to make two one. I doubt it was less of a struggle in Colossae. I believe Paul just had other fish to fry. The relationships on which Paul spends the bulk of his instruction in Colossians is slave-master. And there is a very good reason for that.

4:7-9 tells us who was delivering this letter to Colossae. Two men, Tychicus and Onesimus. And we find out from the little book of Philemon that Onesimus was a runaway slave, converted to Christ. And Philemon was part of the church at Colossae.

With the arrival of this letter, the Colossian church was about to get a very real lesson in what it meant to be a new creation, a single people, united in Christ. Paul focuses on the slave/master relationship for this reason. The principle of 3:17, "Whatever you do...do all in the name of the Lord Jesus," is about to get a real workout. Everything we do is to reflect him, right down to how we treat wives, husbands, children, and employees.

Most civilizations have recognized the importance of the family. Aristotle called the household the "basic unit of the state." The household was certainly vital to the early church. The first public buildings for churches weren't built until at least 100 years after the New Testament era. Where did the church meet in the meantime? In the homes of the Christians (4:15).

What would we find if the church showed up at your house at 9:45am Sundays? I'm not talking about dirty dishes in the sink and dirty clothes on the couch. Imagine meeting in a house where the husband and wife were really struggling in their relationship with each other. It's tough enough to deal with problems at church, let alone at home. Can you imagine how those tensions would affect the church as a whole?

But that isn't the only reason, or even the most important reason for the commands Paul is about to give. These things are critical to the spiritual welfare of the people of the church, husband or wife, parent or child, worker or master, because for all Christians, love is to dominate and the peace of Christ is to rule in our lives.

Wives & Husbands, v18-19. Wives are to "be subject," lit. submit. That one word touches a real nerve. Consider these two quotes regarding this passage and others like it, called "household codes," rather dismissively:

"They do not offer timelessly valid laws, nor do they endow a particular order with ageless dignity. As times change so does the general estimation of what is fitting and proper. Christian exhortation, however, must constantly impress on new generations the admonition to be obedient to the Kyrios. How this obedience is to be expressed concretely at any given time, will always have to be tested and determined anew." Eduard Lohse

"We can only preach on the household codes critically in order to unmask them as tests promoting patriarchal violence." Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza

Sadly, a less bitter version of this view is becoming prevalent in evangelical church. Many are saying that Paul's commands for the home is just cultural teaching, not timeless. But who decides

what is eternal and what is temporal, or cultural? Such rejection stems from a general rejection of God's authority and a misunderstanding of Biblical submission.

The word translated "be subject" is *hupotasso*, a compound word made up from *hupo*, which means "under," and *tasso*, which means to "line up," or "arrange." So the idea is to "line up under" a given authority. It is a military term, but the application goes beyond the military.

Submission is exhorted throughout the New Testament, in all kinds of ways:

- Wives to husbands – Eph. 5:22, Col. 3:18, Titus 2:5
- All to governing authorities – Romans 13:1, Titus 3:1
- Church to Christ – Eph. 5:24
- Slaves to masters – Titus 2:9
- All to one another – Eph. 5:21

Submission is not for the wife only, but for all believers. Compare the command to submit to the commands given to husbands and children, v19-20. Does it say the wife is to obey? To love? Does that mean wives are not to obey or love? No, it means the overall heart attitude of a wife is to be a willingness to arrange herself under the headship of her husband.

And for those who still bristle at the notion of submission, just consider the One who best exemplifies biblical submission, Jesus himself, 1 Corinthians 11:3, 15:28.

How is the wife to submit? "As is fitting in the Lord." That is, willing submission, knowing it is right, because it is how God designed the marriage relationship, without grudging or whining. This is a far cry from one partner lording it over the other, who submits in servile obedience.

God designed man and woman to need each other (Gen. 2:24, 1 Cor. 11:11-12). There is a mutuality to the husband/wife relationship that requires a strong sense of teamwork to make it work as planned.

There is no connotation of inferiority in submission. Instead, there is a recognition of differing roles for men and women. As in Titus 2, where the authority of the husband is only one aspect of his role, albeit one that must be emphasized (Eph. 5:23, 1 Cor. 11:3.)

Obviously, the major concern regarding authority and submission is the abuse and domination heaped on women in the name of biblical submission. Sadly, Christian men have not shown themselves trustworthy in this.

Yet, the command stands. Man's unfaithfulness is never reason to jettison God's command. Women have no reason to fear if their husband takes his responsibility seriously, v19, to love their wives.

How are husbands to love their wives? Eph 5:25, "just as Christ loved the church" How did Christ love the church? He died for it. Husbands, would you die for your wife, and does she know it? If not, that may explain the reason for any lack of submission on her part. Eph. 5:28

goes on to say that husbands are to love their wife as they love their own body. Are you motivated to eat when you are hungry? To sleep when you tired? To take care of your needs? Then care for hers.

There is a second command in v19, "do not be embittered." Something "embittered" is something that was once good that has turned sour. Two examples are given in Revelation, where once pure waters were made bitter and John's once sound stomach was turned bitter (8:11, 10:9).

To be bitter towards someone is to be hateful or resentful toward them. What would be cause for such feelings of bitterness? How about lack of love, submission, misplaced priorities in marriage?

Husbands are told in 1 Pet. 3:7 to "live in understanding way" with their wife. The idea is of consideration, showing honor and respect toward her. Marriage is the "grace of life," a wonderful thing. It is not God's design to be a place of hurt or selfishness. Obviously, there will be disappointments. When hurts come, the husband's reaction is to be first, love and second, not only to avoid indulging in harsh or evil actions, but even to avoid a harsh attitude toward his wife.

Wives, will there be any cause for bitterness from your husband if you are submitting in a godly way? I don't think so. So the command is: wives, submit willingly & trust to loving husband who would die for you, will not reject you even when disappointed. Husbands, love your wife and maintain a loving attitude towards her.

Children & Fathers, v20-21. The command to children in v20-21 is, "Be obedient." Why? Because it is "well pleasing" to the Lord.

In Eph. 6 Paul details that reason with an illustration from 10 commandments. The command to honor parents was the first command with a promise tied to it, Ex. 20:12, "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you."

Does that mean no obedient child will ever die young? Of course not. It is a general truth, not a magic charm. If you want to live long and well, honor, then obey your father & mother. This, of course, assumes your parents are not asking you to do evil, and have your best interests at heart (Matthew 7:7-11).

Note, not moms, not parents, but "father." What does that say about Dad's role in raising kids? Fathers had absolute legal control over lives of children until the day he died or he declared them independent, even into adulthood. No wonder Paul had to make sure fathers knew they were not to "exasperate," to fret and harrass, to rouse to resentment their children.

Fathers, what happens if you exasperate your kids? They will "lose heart," they will become discouraged. You can just hear the child saying, "What's the use of trying to please him? He never listens, he never helps, he only yells at me and lays down the law."

My wife and I found ourselves here many times. Lecturing, getting on our kids (not that they were blameless). It is far too easy to say “no” all the time. Instead, Dad’s, work hard to bring your children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). That is not a burdensome thing:

Jesus said, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light...” Matthew 11:29-30. Following Christ is not rule-bound, Col. 2:20-21, but a thing of love and grace.

In the next study we'll finish "Family Matters" with a look at slaves & masters, v22-25.

Family Matters, 2: Colossians 3:22-4:1

In chapter 3 of Colossians, we have seen that no sphere of influence is ignored. Relationships in the body are to be dominated by love, 3:12-14, ruled by Christ’s peace, 3:15, that Christ’s word is to be central to everything we do, 3:16, and the name of Christ is to be upheld, 3:17.

“Whatever you do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus...” Everything we do should reflect Christ.

Everything. That obviously goes past church relationships into every corner of our lives. That fact is underscored in 3:18-4:1. Wives are to submit "in the Lord," v18. Children are to obey because to do so is “well-pleasing to the Lord,” v20. Slaves are to obey their earthly masters "as to the Lord," v23, knowing that their reward is “from the Lord,” v24. Masters are to be just and fair, knowing they "have a Master in heaven." All our lives, all our relationships, are to be lived in the Lord.

In the previous lesson, we examined the Bible's teaching on wives and husbands, children and fathers. In this lesson, we will focus on employees and employers.

Slaves & masters, v22-25. Out of all the "household codes," Paul spends the bulk of his time here because of Onesimus, one of two men who brought his letter to Colossae (4:9). Onesimus was a runaway slave who converted to Christ, and was owned by Philemon, a leader in the Colossian church (Philemon 2), and now has returned to be reconciled to his owner. The Colossian church is about to get a real lesson in what it means to be a new creation.

Does that trouble you, that Paul is bringing Onesimus back to slavery? Slavery was largely (not entirely) abolished in the 18th and 19th centuries with the help of Christians on the ground and in the political debate. Today, Christians like Chuck Colson lead the way against slavery in repressive cultures around the world. Yet, here is Paul, leading a Christian brother back into it.

Which points up the most obvious thing Paul does *not* tell slaves: get yourselves free. The biblical view of slavery itself is *that it is not unmitigated evil*, but it is not something to be desired either. A far cry from our culture's view of slavery!

There are two very important principles regarding slavery found in 1 Cor. 7:21-22. We will not take the time to detail them here, but in short they are: First, slavery is nothing to worry about in Christ, but if you have the option to be free, take it. "*Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.*"

Second, in Christ, all are slaves, and all are free. Don't put so much emphasis on your status in this world that you lose sight of that fact. *"For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave."*

Praise God, slavery as we know is largely a thing of the past. So applying the Bible's teaching regarding slaves and masters is best done with regard to employees and employers. It isn't 100% the same, but the general principles still apply. I can summarize the whole lesson right here: 1) Obey, and 2) work hard.

"Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality." (Colossians 3:22-25)

As before, the command to obey presumes that the master is not asking the slave to do evil. Paul says when you are commanded, you are to do it "not with external service" but with "sincerity of heart." Not eye-service, but heart service. Who is such service directed toward? The Lord, not the man.

When I was at IBM, I had a friend in my unit who was badly overworked and underpaid. He struggled with obvious attitude problems, until, one day, he seemed much happier, and I asked him about it. He told me, "I've resigned from IBM." I was surprised - leaving Mother IBM wasn't something that happened often. "You're kidding!" I said. He replied, "No, I've resigned from IBM and gone to work for the Lord."

I thought he was telling me he was going to be a missionary or something, but he hadn't actually left IBM at all. Instead, he had come to realize that he worked for the Lord first, and IBM second. He was adjusting his attitude to reflect that while it was IBM that signed his check, it was the Lord whom he worked for. And the change in his outlook was obvious to all around him.

He realized his employer wasn't ultimately IBM, but Jesus Christ. Knowing that, he could work "heartily," with all his heart, all he had to give. IBM, trust me, was no godly master. Yet he realized Jesus Christ would have him obey IBM as himself.

If that is how employees are to work, then employers have responsibility as well: to be just and fair, 4:1. *"Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven."*

Employers have a dual responsibility, to their company and to their workers. Being true to both requires justice and fairness. A slave couldn't simply leave his master – he wasn't free. That's why Onesimus is coming back to Philemon. But the master could grant him freedom, or the slave could earn money to buy it. What about you as an employee? If you can't serve heartily, it is probably better that you leave, find other employment where you can.

What is your attitude toward your work? We live in a culture that has a very skewed work ethic. On one hand you have workaholics, men and women who'd rather work than anything. on the other hand, you have people who choose not to work at all. And in the middle, the great mass of people work, but have a pretty negative view of it. Popular culture is often seen best in that modern-day repository of profound philosophy, bumper stickers. Here are a few reflecting our culture's attitudes towards work:

- "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go"
- "I'd rather be fishing... flying... golfing... skiing... hiking..." etc., etc.
- "He who dies with the most toys wins"
- "Work fascinates me: I can sit and watch it for hours."
- "Thank God it's Friday"
- "Hard work may not kill me, but why take a chance?"

Whatever work we do seems to have no value compared with play. Work is simply a way to pay off our debts, and fund our style of life. Have you ever seen a sign on the back of a golf cart, "I'd rather be working?" Or a license plate, "Thank God it's Monday?"

Without a proper work ethic we don't work well, we don't work with excellence. "But," some would ask, "isn't work a result of the curse?" The curse is in Genesis 3:17-19:

"Then to Adam He said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat from it'; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it All the days of your life. "Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.""

Note that work isn't the curse, but work was cursed, that is, it became toil, a burden. Work was actually introduced in Genesis 2:15, before the Fall, *"Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it."*

Adam was to "cultivate and keep" the Garden. That's work - noble work, exalted work, work unstained with sin. Someone has said that "God designed man to be a gardener but the Fall made him a farmer." God's intent was that man would care for the garden, would reap its benefits and make it flourish. But the Fall caused thorns and thistles, and work became difficult. The Fall didn't introduce work, it cursed it. It became a burden. But from the first man was designed to be a worker.

As Christians then, and by the power of the Holy Spirit in us, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to elevate work back to its point of dignity. "Work heartily, as unto the Lord." Such an attitude toward work is the result of a Spirit-filled life. Just as a Christian wife and husband bring dignity into marriage by submitting to and loving one another, so a Christian brings dignity into work by doing it as unto the Lord. We take it out of the category of drudgery, and make it valuable to God and to us and our family and others.

That is how we must view work. We do it as unto the Lord and not unto men. Work is a creation mandate, a natural law invested with inherent dignity. It's is God's way for man, and we can do it to His praise.

Private Life, Public Life: Colossians 4:2-6

Paul has shown how the sufficiency of Christ affects our relationships in the body and in the home. Now, to conclude this letter, he shows how our relationships with outsiders are to be conducted. Instead of commands that are for a specific group, such as "husbands love your wives," these cut across all identity lines and apply to all believers, both in private life and public.

Private Live: How We Pray, v2. Paul modeled prayer for the Colossians in 1:9-12, "we have not ceased to pray for you..." Now he encourages them in their own prayer life, with these three points:

"Devote yourselves to prayer..." This is the consistent command regarding prayer throughout Scripture:

- 1 Thess. 5:17, "pray without ceasing"
- Eph. 6:18, "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints"
- Acts 1:14; "These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer..." Acts 2:42, "they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching...fellowship...breaking of bread... and prayer." Acts 6:4, "we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

The Greek for "devote" is *proskartereo*, which means to attend to something constantly. Being devoted to prayer means attending to it all the time. In other words, praying without ceasing. Nothing is said about our posture, whether we are to be standing, sitting, or walking around. Whether or not our heads are bowed or lifted, our hands are up or down. The focus is internal, not external. The answer to the question "How do we pray?" is "constantly."

If you want a good picture of what it means to be "devoted" to something, check out Mark 3:9: "He told His disciples that a boat should ***stand ready*** for Him because of the crowd..." The word translated "stand ready" is the same Greek word translated "devoted" in Colossians 4:2. Just like a boat that always stands ready for use at a moment's notice, we are to stand ready to pray.

The second command adds to the sense of urgency regarding prayer, ***"keeping alert in it."*** Jesus used the same word to describe the attitude of his disciples as they wait for his return.

- Matthew 24:42-43, "be on the ***alert***, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. "But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the ***alert*** and would not have allowed his house to be broken into."
- Mark 13:35-37, "be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming...in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. "What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!'" "

How does alertness show itself? What does it mean to be alert in light of Christ's return? It means to be watching out for it, expecting it. What impact would such alertness have on our lives? It would mean we are prepared, we would be found faithful. As we are to be alert for his return, we are to be alert in prayer. In other words, *constant spiritual watchfulness*.

Paul's final point regarding prayer is that it is to be offered "***with an attitude of thanksgiving***" The attitude of our hearts in prayer is to be one of thanks. Even if God doesn't grant our request? Yup. We saw the importance of thankfulness in our study on Colossians 3:15-17. If prayer is dry duty, then thanks is probably missing.

As Fathers, we often talk about spending "quality time" vs "quantity time" with our children. So too with our heavenly Father. We need to spend both quality and quantity time with God. If you added up your time in prayer each week, what term of measurement would you use? Hours, minutes...?

Here's a sobering thought. For a leader in the church, it is a sin not to pray in this way. Samuel, the Judge of Israel, said in 1 Samuel 12:23, "Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you..." When I as your pastor don't pray for you, it is sin against God.

Paul goes on in v3-4 to tell us ***what we should pray for***. Considering that Paul is in prison, his request in v3 is not what we'd expect someone to pray today. He isn't asking to be released from prison, to have safety from his accusers, or even strength for his trial. Nope, he prays for an open door for the gospel, v3.

It's ironic, because speaking the mystery of Christ is why he's in jail in the first place. But Paul is asking for more opportunity to spread the gospel, no matter where he is, with prison guards, visitors, or in the wider world outside the prison. Was his request granted? Yes, both by release and by his letters to the churches. .

What would we think of the Apostle Paul chained? "What a waste! What a loss to the church!" Not Paul. To him, his chains just represented another opportunity. When we pray, let's not focus on earthly circumstances, but on heavenly purposes.

The second thing Paul prays for in v4 is ***clarity***. Here is something to consider. The Apostle Paul, the man whom the Spirit used to write most of the New Testament, the man who was taken up to "Paradise" and heard things which men are "not permitted to speak," needs a prayer for clarity.

Why? Didn't Paul understand the gospel inside out? Would he have any struggle enunciating the facts of God's provision for man? Of course he understood it. The basic idea here is not so much clarity in fact as it is clarity in the hearts of his hearers. Paul is asking prayers for effectiveness, for the truth of the gospel to combine with the power of the Spirit and result in the salvation of those who hear.

Just as Paul requested prayer for his opportunities, he will now focus the Colossians on their own...

Public Life: How We Live, v5. Prayer a matter of the inner life, but now Paul turns to public living. What is the importance of first making sure your private life is in order? Because, over time, your inner life will catch up with you, and either limit or destroy your public effectiveness.

When presented with an opportunity to give testimony to what God has done, you may react in fear or embarrassment. Paul wants the Colossians to be whole, in their private and public lives. So he tells them, “conduct yourselves in wisdom toward outsiders.”

“*Conduct yourselves,*” is a good translation of “walk.” We saw in 1:10 that we are to walk worthy. In 2:6, we are to walk as those who have received Christ. Here, we are to walk “with wisdom toward outsiders.”

Wisdom in Bible is neither philosophical nor intellectual, but practical and realistic. In Proverbs, wisdom is commonly skill for living. So it is here. Wisdom is knowing how to live in a fallen world that rejects you and your Lord, and knows how to respond accordingly.

Is that something that can be done without thought or planning? No, that's why we need wisdom for it. We are to *give thought* to a life that commends itself to those outside the faith.

1 Thess. 4:9-12, *“Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more, and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you, so that you will behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any need.”*

This is why we buy fertilizer and weed killer. We should live our lives with our neighbors in view (and in my neighborhood, at least, the neighbors appreciate a mown lawn where the dandelions don't blow into the neighbor's yards). This obviously goes past merely “religious” matters, and speaks to the practical, daily way we approach life.

“*Making the most of the opportunity.*” *exagorazo kairos*, Lit. “redeem the time,” buy it up. Picture a garage sale shopper, making every Saturday morning minute count. Eph 5:15-16 says we are to “make the most of our time” because the days are evil. Time is short for this fallen world. We must redeem time, and every opportunity God has given us by using it in the most effective way possible.

Think of Jesus’s parables of hidden treasure, the pearl of great price in Mt. 13:44-46, where the characters give up all for that treasure of the kingdom. This is the same idea. You can never have the last 5 minutes back, so evaluate your activity. How does it contribute? Each opportunity with outsiders is to be bought, and treated as precious.

This isn’t so much a formal presentation of our testimony or the gospel as it is how we live daily. But one of most visible means of showing who we are with our speech.

How We Speak, v6. Paul goes past putting aside abusive speech in 3:8-9, and says our language is to be salted with grace. What is food like without salt? Usually tasteless, and spoils quickly. It's ironic that we have taken the term "salty language" and made it mean something profane. Paul's use is 180 degrees opposite, and says our language is to be salted with grace.

"With grace" refers to both its content, which should be the grace of God, but also the manner of our speaking, its graciousness. There should be a measure of pleasantness, of attractiveness and charm about our speaking. I'm not talking about polished, urbane, and witty, but good, pleasant, and right.

Eph. 4:29, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear." Foul speech isn't the only kind of speech that doesn't edify. What about the constant complainer? The gossip? The belittler?

Seasoning our speech with grace also has this result in v6, "so that you will know how you should respond to each person." There's an element of wisdom here, knowing what the situation requires, and what the individual in front of you needs to hear. Think ahead what you will do and say when the opportunity arises. Can you anticipate every need? No, so make sure grace is sprinkled throughout your speech.

Peter said it well, 1 Peter 3:15, "sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."

Note, we are not responsible for the results, just the action. The results are in God's hands. This is a life of continual prayer that blends with thoughtful action. It's a far cry from the world's stereotype. The question is, is it a far cry from your reality? If so, it is never too late to make a change.

Everybody Says Hi: Colossians 4:7-18

Paul has shown how the sufficiency of Christ affects relationships in the body, in the home, and with those outside the faith. Now he draws the letter to a close in the "standard" way, with greetings to and from his friends. We may tend to rush thru these lists of unfamiliar names, but we can learn a lot from them...

Like the letter to the Romans, Colossians ends with a laundry list of people important to Paul, both in Colossae and with him in Rome. Paul was not a loner, not a man so possessed with his own sense of self and destiny that he excludes others or treats them as the means to his ends. These lists show us two things: how much he cares for people, and how much they care for him.

The Messengers: Tychicus, v7-8. Tychicus was from Asia (Act 20:4), and was one of Paul's traveling companions, accompanying Paul on his final journey to Jerusalem with the collection for the saints. From Jerusalem, Paul was imprisoned 2 years in Caesarea, then shipped to Rome,

from where he now writes. If Tychicus has been with him in Rome, then it is likely he was with him all the way from Caesarea.

Colossians was written in Paul's 1st Roman imprisonment. After he was released, he traveled a bit more. We know from Titus 3:12 that Tychicus was still with him. He was imprisoned again a few years later, and ultimately beheaded. 2 Tim. 4:12 tells us that Tychicus was there until the end.

Some speculate that Tychicus is the mysterious unnamed "brother" of 2 Cor. 8:18-19, "the brother whose fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches..." Compare that with Paul's description of Tychicus in Col. 4:7, Eph. 6:21, "beloved brother, faithful servant, fellow bond-slave"

Why did Paul send Tychicus to Colossae? First, to fill in details about Paul's circumstances, v7-8. Don't you wish those details were in this letter for us to read? But that shows the relative unimportance Paul placed on his circumstances. He was not the kind of guy who felt his ministry revolved around him.

Secondly, in v8, Paul is sending Tychicus to encourage their hearts, both by letter and by personal ministry. Paul struggled in prayer for the Colossians for that very thing, 2:2, and now Tychicus is fulfilling Paul's ministry on his behalf.

Onesimus, v9. As stated in a [previous lesson](#), Onesimus was a local, a runaway slave who joined up with Paul, and became a Christian. How'd he get to Paul if Paul was never in Colossae? He probably met Paul during his 3-year stay in Ephesus, 100 miles away. He is referenced in Philemon 10 and 16-17, "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus...no longer a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me," "If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me."

Now Paul is sending him back to his master for reconciliation, and clearly, he also hopes Philemon will free him so he can rejoin Paul in ministry.

Fellow Jews: Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus Justus, v10-11. **Aristarchus**, like Tychicus, was a long-time and valued helper to Paul. A native of Thessalonica. (Acts 27:2), he traveled with Paul along with Tychicus (20:4). He was with Paul in Ephesus, and was in the very middle of the Ephesian riot, Acts 19:29. He traveled with Paul to Rome, Acts 27:2. Called here a "fellow prisoner," he may also have been in jail with Paul. More on that in a moment.

Mark, Barnabus' cousin, was the same Mark who began the 1st missionary journey with Paul, Barnabus, but bailed early (Acts 13:13). Paul had rejected Mark's help on the 2nd journey as result, but obviously they have reconciled. Paul makes note of his relation to Barnabus, which can only mean that Barnabus was known to the Colossians.

Jesus Justus, here is a mix of the obscure with the prominent. There is no other mention of this man in Scripture. Remember, "Jesus" was a very common 1st century Jewish name, and continued to be until the mid 2nd century, when its use completely disappeared.

One of Your Own: Epaphras, v12-13. Epaphras brought the gospel to Colossae (1:7). He is an evangelist, and most likely an elder there and at the sister city churches a few miles away, Laodicea and Heirapolis, v13.

Paul describes him as a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, one who labors from them in prayer, just as Paul does, 2:1. Epaphras knows their needs and the threat of the false teachers, and who was most likely to be seduced by them. File this along with the command to “be devoted” to prayer. What was the goal of Epaphras' prayers? That the Colossians would stand perfect and fully assured. A lofty goal!

Do we understand the role of intercessory prayer in spiritual formation? We teach the word so that our people would stand perfect and fully assured, which is perfectly true (see Col. 1:28, 2 Tim 3:16-17). But that responsibility doesn't stop with the Word. It extends to prayer as well.

In Philemon 23, Epaphras is described as Paul's “fellow prisoner,” just as Aristarchus is in Col. 4:10. Besides himself, only these 2 men are called “prisoners of the Lord.” A “respectable” Roman prisoner was allowed 2 personal slaves to serve him in his imprisonment. Perhaps these two men were serving time along with Paul to minister to him?

All the Rest: Luke, Demas, et al, v14-16. Luke, named in v14, was another important companion of Paul's, and is actually named in Scripture less than Tychicus and Aristarchas. We know him because of his gospel and the book of Acts.

The second man named in v14 appears to be on the same level as the rest, Demas. In Philemon 24, these two are grouped again. But what a contrast in how they finished. 2 Tim 4:10-11 tells us that Demas ended poorly, abandoning Paul for love of the world. Sad to say, proximity to greatness and intimacy with strength are no guarantee of finishing well.

“Love of the present world” (as opposed to the world to come) took Demas away. What became of him? Was it just a blip in an otherwise faithful life, like Peter's hypocrisy in Gal. 2, or was it full scale apostasy? We don't know, but the reality is that each of us has the ability to be either a Demas or a Luke. This list of friends includes 2 prominent former failures, Onesimus and Mark, and one prominent future failure, Demas.

The church at Laodicea and in Nympha's house, v15-16. The church in Colossae met in at least 2 homes, Nympha's, v15, and also in Philemon's (Philemon 2). Nympha is significant because the name most likely indicates a woman. There could have been other house churches as well.

There was clearly communion between the Colossian and Laodicean churches. They know one another. The early church thrived because of the network of friends in cities around the Roman Empire, and it needed such friends.

In a day when inns were foul, dangerous places, where Christians were regarded as somewhere being curious and threatening, the network of friends made it possible for the Apostles to travel and teach, and for letters to be carried from church to church. The reason for our need is not the

same, but the need still exists. Christians should cultivate deep friendships, and be involved w/one another.

The churches shared their letters. That's how the New Testament was built. The church in one city received a letter from Paul. Then they heard that the church over in City X also had a letter, so they copied theirs and sent it over and picked up a copy in return. Over time, the churches had them all. Did it take a long time? Only a few years. When Clement of Rome wrote his letter to the churches around 95AD, he quoted from almost all of them, proving they were known in at least one church - Rome.

Clearly, this letter to the Colossians was pretty important. The letter to Laodicea, which was a much more important city, is lost to us, while the letter to the small town of Colossae was protected. Size of church or city isn't the important matter when God determines priority.

Final words, v17-18. We don't know anything of Archippus, v17. We don't know much about him, as he is only named here and in Philemon. He is called a "fellow soldier" in Philemon 2. The only other men so called are Epaphroditus, who ministered to Paul from Philippi and carried his letter to the Philippians, and Timothy, Paul's most trusted companion. Both men were probably elders in their churches, so possibly Archippus was an elder in Colossae.

Paul's word to Archippus is, "Take heed to your ministry." Was he giving it up, or was Paul simply encouraging him to keep it up? We don't know. The Lord is the one who gave him the ministry, but Archippus is the one who is responsible for it. The big question is, who has responsibility to hold him to it? The Colossians. Paul's command to Archippus was witnessed by the entire church. We need to hold our elders and pastors to account for their ministries.

Paul finishes the letter with his own hand, as he did in Rom 16.22, Gal 6.11, 2 Thess 3:17, and Philemon 19. Paul used an amanuensis to write his letters for him, but he sometimes liked to add his own greeting at the end. Some speculate he needed a secretary due to an eye disease, and further speculate that this is his "thorn in the flesh," from 2 Cor. 12:7. That may be true, but Peter also used a secretary (Silas, named in 1 Pet 5:12).

"Remember my imprisonment," literally "bonds" or "chains." This is not a plea for pity, but a reminder to pray for him personally, and encouragement to those who will suffer persecution, or already are. Either way, he ends the same way he began, conferring God's grace to the Colossians.