

THE GOSPEL'S POWER

Colossians 1:9-23

It is not uncommon for us to hear the words “gospel” and “truth” used together. The power of the “gospel” is, of course, inexorably intertwined with truth. Sometimes it is difficult to discover the truth about anything. If you have watched the political arena over the past several decades, you realize that what someone says can have an entirely different meaning to you than what it may have meant to the person who said it. For example, the idea of the American dream may mean that the government will take care of you from the cradle to the grave. To others, it might mean that you have the freedom to go as far as your talents and hard work will take you and that your children will have more opportunity than you or your parents had.

We have many adages or sayings we take for granted. Many times, when we use an expression such as, “we have a government of the people, by the people and for the people,” we don't really consider the full implication of what it means. Most of us think of such an assertion in terms of our right to vote and that we have a representative form of government. Such a statement might also imply the source, basis or world view of our society. Unless the concept “of, by, and for the people” is balanced with a strong underlying foundation of a Creator God to Whom we are ultimately responsible, then this concept or idea will evolve into secular humanism.

In the area of our Christianity, we have many sayings that define our beliefs and principles by which we operate. We talk about being “saved” and yet many would have trouble giving a good definition of what “salvation” is all about. We speak of saints and some might think of people pictured in stained glass windows. We talk about being “under grace” and “not under the law” and think that it means the Ten Commandments no longer have to be observed. We say that “Jesus is Lord” and think that it simply means that He is Deity. Knowing what the words mean that we or others use is critically important.

Two main themes evident in the writings of Paul are related to *theology* and *practical living*. If we understand the theology correctly, then we will have a better chance to be correct in the way we express practical living aspects in our daily lives. Without knowing the nature and character of God, we will have little idea of the target toward which we must direct our lives. The ultimate goal to which we must project is to be transformed into the image of Jesus.

Paul's letter to the church at Colossae was written from prison (either in Ephesus, Caesarea, or Rome) when Timothy was with him. Paul had not visited this church but had heard of their faith through one of its leaders named Epaphras. Paul wanted to encourage them and prepare them to resist false teachers who were in that area. Apparently, the false teaching involved claims that salvation starts with believing in Jesus but that was not enough, other things had to be done.

Set Free – 1:9-14

⁹ And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:9–14 (ESV)

After Paul was told about the Colossian church, he started ministering to them by praying for them and up until they received this letter from Paul, they likely had no idea that such a

ministry on their behalf was happening. We often say (and really believe) that prayer changes things and yet we are neglectful to actually engage in prayer. Since the real battle for our lives and the condition of our nation is a spiritual battle, we can accomplish much more for the Kingdom of God in the prayer closet (always praying in the Spirit) than we can battling other people on social media or even in the halls of Congress or school board meetings. The word of truth certainly needs to be voiced in such settings; however, the battle is won or lost in the spiritual realm.

The first priority in Paul's prayer was for them to be filled with "the knowledge of God's will" in the light of spiritual wisdom and understanding. Without having spiritual wisdom and understanding, then the word of God (which is the will of God) can wind up being an inert set of facts that fails to transform us and fails to influence our interactions with the world around us.

Many professing Christians operate almost entirely in a realm of superficiality with regard to the will of God. A good description of this approach to our Christian walk might be described as "low resolution thinking" that fails to consider anything other than ritual and religious routines that we regularly experience. The contrast to such superficiality is that the conduct of our lives in the practical, everyday aspects of how we think, what we say and what we do will be aligned with the Way which Christ demonstrated to us. In this contrasting way we will be fulfilling the word of the Lord through Isaiah where we see in chapter 30, verse 21:

"Whether you turn right or left, Your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, This is the Way; walk in it."

We realize that this is a "spiritual voice" that we hear with "spiritual ears."

When we follow God's will in the proper way, the results will be that our lives will agree with the character of Christ or that we will "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord." Of course, there needs to be a zeal for the Lord for the knowledge we have to find expression beyond just thinking, contemplating, and meditating on what we know and understand. Knowledge without zeal leads to pious passivity while zeal without knowledge leads to religiously-driven chaos.

Paul gave an extensive list of what he meant by walking in a manner worthy of the Lord. The first and overarching consideration is that we are pleasing to God. God is pleased by those who do His will, keep His commandments, follow His precepts, etc. If we do these things, then the results will be that we will bear fruit in the works of faith that God had foreordained that we are to accomplish (the fruit of righteousness). As we walk in His will, we will find confirmation of and increase in our knowledge of God. It is in His will that we discover the power available to us through the Holy Spirit by which we are enabled to be pleasing to Him without wavering and giving up (gifts of the Spirit). We cannot do this in our own strength. Realizing what God is doing in our lives will result in joy that comes from the assurance we have "that we belong to Him and that we are secure in Him." Paul contrasted this condition with those who are still in the kingdom of darkness and have not accepted the forgiveness and redemption available through the work of salvation that Christ did for all who would receive Him.

By Christ – 1:15-20

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. Colossians 1:15–20 (ESV)

Jesus is the perfect picture of God Whom we cannot otherwise see. The Greek word translated "image" is *iekon* from which we get the English word icon. God is Spirit and His

physical appearance is immaterial (no pun intended). The real issue is *what is His nature and character?* These (the fruit of the Spirit) are what Jesus showed us by His life. In Hebrews 1:3, we see that Jesus is the “express image” of God’s being. The Greek word translated “express image” is the word from which we get the English word “character.” In John’s gospel, Jesus is called the Word of God, which could be thought of as God communicating Himself to us.

Paul addressed the deity of Jesus in terms of the creation. Jesus is referred to as the “firstborn over all creation.” The Greek word for firstborn is *prototokus* from which we derive our word prototype or model. This position of firstborn also speaks of privilege and rank over everything created. Why does He have this position? Because He created everything. “For by Him (Jesus, God the Son) all things were created.” When it says, **all things** it means physical and spiritual, visible and invisible. Not only were all things created **by** Him, all things were created **for** Him. We might say that we have a universe of God, by God and for God. Even more amazing, we find that all things continue in the state of “being” because of his creative power.

We could summarize the first three verses (15-17) by saying that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God to man. He is the most complete picture of God that we can ever have and is our model regarding man’s relationship to God especially with respect to man being created in the image of God. Jesus is the pioneer and role model for all of creation – the first born of every creature. He can be all these things because He is one with the Creator God. Creation is more than just the physical world; it extends even to the spiritual world. Everything was created by God and for His purpose.

Some groups believe and argue that Jesus (the Christ) was a created being. How can this be if He is before all things? Being “before all things” means that He is preexistent before creation.

In a parallel way, Paul presents Christ as the firstborn from the dead and therefore the first (or type) of the new creation of the human race – those who have been born again. In this way, He is head of the church or the new creation. Therefore, not only is Christ the Creator and Head of the universe (the original creation), He is also the Head of the New Creation (the Church).

Paul built a parallel comparison. First of all, Jesus Christ was the agent of creation in the beginning and, consequently, He is Lord of the created universe. Next, in the New Creation, which is exemplified by the church, we see that Jesus Christ is Lord there, also. Paul argued that Jesus was the “first-born from the dead” to show that the Resurrection was the evidence of His right to be the head of this new creation. This term also holds promise that those who accept His Lordship will be raised, also. The church is made up of those that have died to self and been raised to new life in the same way as depicted in the burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Some groups in Paul’s day taught that Jesus Christ was a lesser God than God the Father. Paul’s answer to them is that the fullness of the Godhead is in Christ Jesus and there is no conflict with God the Father and God the Son.

When sin entered the world, it caused all of the creation to be separated from God. In the beginning, God put the dominion of all the earth under the care of man. When man stopped serving God and started serving Satan, then the dominion of the earth was acquired by Satan. In His death on the Cross, Jesus regained the authority over all of heaven and earth and established His church to be about the business of bringing about a reconciliation of all things to Himself *in deed*.

The purpose of the fullness of the Godhead being in Christ was for the completion of His

mission and that was to reconcile all things to Himself. The Greek word translated “reconcile” literally means “to be thoroughly changed.” We see that Jesus made peace through His blood. This peace was a result of His paying the debt caused by our sin and this opened up the way for us to be restored to fellowship with God. Once this fellowship was restored, then the business of reconciliation – thoroughly changing everything – could take place.

What happened in the work of Christ was to fundamentally change the world. It reversed what had happened in Babel in which the nations were scattered and were under the dominion of other gods. Additionally, it was the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed in that they would be brought (bought) back from the kingdoms of darkness into the kingdom of light. It was somewhat a fulfillment of the scattered tribes being gathered together in a new kingdom in that many Israelites from all over the known world were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and these then took the message of salvation back to their homes and planted the seed or the leaven of the gospel in those areas. The symbolism of that reversal of the confounding of their language at Babel was found in the “language” phenomenon that happened on the day of Pentecost that allowed all to hear the message in their own tongue. All this was accomplished through Jesus’ death, confirmed by His resurrection and demonstrated in the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Through His Death – 1:21-23

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. Colossians 1:21–23 (ESV)

In these verses, Paul moved from the global or universal reconciliation of all things to the specific or individual reconciliation of persons who have put their trust in Christ’s completed work on the cross. The importance of expressing the truth of this reconciliation to the world around us can be better understood if we will simply remember what life was like before we came to know the Lord and experienced His salvation. Paul used the term “alienated” to describe what was going on in our minds regarding our relationship with God. This gives us the idea of being separated because of not being familiar with something. Lack of familiarity can be correct by being “filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”

We all grow up in a world that imprints us in a particular way that is akin to “the survival of the fittest.” It is a world that teaches a “dog-eat-dog” philosophy and competitiveness as a way to operate. We are primarily influence by the physical and emotional aspects of life and “spiritual” reality seems strange and unfamiliar. A natural reaction to the “strange and unfamiliar” is that we see it as a threat and it produces hostility or resistance to embracing the unknown.

Because our thinking is faulty, then our behavior will be influenced by the faulty thinking. Our actions begin with thoughts and our actions will be in alignment with what we believe to be the truth (our world view). If we think that “winning at whatever the cost” is the proper attitude, then our behavior will be different from that which results from embracing the idea that “it is not whether we win or lose but how we play the game.”

The opposite of being “alienated and hostile” is being reconciled. Just as we were separated from God and did not have peace, even so the world without Jesus is separated from God and lacks peace. Jesus brought about this reconciliation by his death in which He took our sins upon Himself. He died to bear the penalty of sin (the wages of sin is death) so that we could

be as reconciled to Himself. The alienation and hostility resulted in “wrong behavior.” In the same way, being in a proper relationship with God (that is, being righteous) results in being holy and blameless in His sight and the behavior we express is evidence of this proper relationship. We participated in this blessing by faith (for by grace are we saved through faith) and we will continue therein by faith. Our faith is not in our own righteousness nor the works or good deeds we do but in the completed work of Jesus by which we are qualified to look forward in hope of spending eternity united with Christ Jesus our Lord. If we haven't acknowledged Him as Lord in this life, how can He be our Savior now and in eternity?