

THE GOSPEL'S FORGIVENESS

Colossians 2:4-15

We are constantly bombarded with ideas about how things should work. It is most evident nowadays in the socioeconomic area where we hear well-meaning people advocating that we provide financial help to everyone who makes a request. We have people who have expanded our rights from “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” to include free health care and taxpayer-funded abortions and gender-altering operations. Because we live in such a secular society, we don’t hear a lot of ideas that are related to alternative religions even though they are around and available. The churches in Asia Minor (which is now Turkey) were being tested by false teachers and Paul was not only trying to encourage the Christians in the tri-cities area of Colossae, Hieropolis, and Laodicae, but also to warn them to be alert to the possibility of being led astray by these false teachers.

Continue – 2:4-7

⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. ⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. Colossians 2:4-7 (ESV)

We may find ourselves hearing someone advocating for a particular point of view and think something to the effect, “I can see that – that is reasonable.” Then when we hear a completely opposing point of view we might also think “I can see that – that is reasonable.” The problem is that we can’t have it both ways. Many times, we don’t get all the facts, we don’t think through the probable outcome and the unintended consequences and we wind up missing the truth or the best approach or route that we should take. This is the danger in being deluded with plausible arguments and this delusion results from low resolution thinking.

In the case of the truth of the gospel message, we need to diligently hold on to that truth and not drift off into some alternate interpretation that sounds good on the surface. We really need to be able to **recognize** truth and to **recognize** error. We also should be careful to **remember** where we were and what we believed prior to salvation and not drift back into the thought patterns and behaviors that characterized that time in our lives. We need to **resist** the tendency to add a lot of “religious” stuff to the simple truth of the gospel message. Finally, we should **refuse** to be involved in the superstitions and folk lore traditions that are part of the culture in which we live.

One of the things that brought joy to Paul when he was in prison was to learn about the various churches that were on the right track. He specifically mentioned two things about this church: the first was their “orderliness” and the second was their solid “faith in Christ.” We can all appreciate the need for organization in any group of people. Without definite responsibilities being assigned to specific persons, very little would ever get accomplished. Many people object to overly defined organization because they see that as rigidity; however, a properly organized group will have built in flexibility.

More important than orderliness is the foundation or principle upon which an organization is based. The church at Colossae put their faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ. They were not depending on Christ **plus** something else to be acceptable to God. We need to be wary of any religious group that has any requirement beyond “Christ alone” as their basis for justification in God's sight.

Not only is Jesus necessary and sufficient for our justification, He is also necessary and sufficient for our growth and maturity. This applies as well to just living life on a daily basis. We initially received Christ by faith and it is by faith that we continue in our relationship with Him. People have a tendency to want to “work for” or earn their salvation. The Bible clearly teaches the error of this. Even after we have accepted Jesus, we find the old ways are still there and we think we must use our own strength to grow. We fail to keep in mind that it is God Who is working in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure. In the early church, many had come to God through trusting Jesus but had tried to grow by getting caught up in a salvation by works philosophy.

Our focus and aim must always be on Jesus. We want to have a solid foundation, but that foundation must be Jesus Himself. We want to grow, but we must grow in Him. We want to have more confidence, but that confidence must be in Him. That is what Paul meant by “rooted, built up and strengthened in the faith.”

Be Careful - 2:8-10

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. Colossians 2:8–10 (ESV)

It is possible for Christians to be sidetracked or “taken captive” by philosophies based on human experience. The Christian life is a supernatural life. A. W. Tozer said “if you can explain a Christian experience on the basis of psychology, you’ve got a good church member, but you haven’t got a born-again Christian.” The problem is not that people have philosophy but they have philosophy based on the wrong thing. Philosophy asks the question “What is reality?” and seeks to understand it. To simply accept the traditions men have built up as the basis for truth and not turn to the Source of all truth is poor philosophy.

The church is under attack by Satan and one of his best tools is our own pride in the fact that we are human beings. For some reason many people think they know more than God does. People want to make up their own rules and develop their own explanations and create their own value system.

Going beyond such poor philosophy, Paul was also concerned about what he called the “elemental spirits” (ESV) or “rudiments of the cosmos” (KJV) associated with vain or empty baseless claims about reality. We develop theories of how the universe began that take more “faith” to accept than the Genesis account. We propose theories and teach them for truth regarding evolution, not just within species, but from one species to another. This again takes more faith to accept than the simple statement that God created each “according to its kind.” The various kinds of dogs probably did evolve from other dogs but dogs did not evolve from frogs and man did not evolve from monkeys. Such things are the humanistic traditions of men. We also need to guard against acceptance of such beliefs as is implied in such terminology as “mother earth.” (In the current news we see an effort by some to give “mother earth” the same legal rights as human beings - whatever that means.) We cannot afford to “buy into” the false religious ideas that the constellations of stars influence our lives. Our philosophy of life must be based only on the revelation of Jesus Christ Who is “God revealed to mankind in the flesh” and as revealed by God’s indwelling presence (the Holy Spirit) that Jesus is God’s only provision for salvation. Jesus really is **all we need**.

We can find teaching today that Jesus was only one of a series of Messiahs that have come on the world scene throughout its history. This error was around in Paul’s day and was being promoted by the Gnostics who claimed that they had “special knowledge.” They taught

that each of these Messiahs is necessary as part of the revelation of God. Paul countered such ideas when he stated that in Jesus Christ we find the full and ultimate revelation of God and we can find our completeness in Him.

Many of the world's religions do not recognize a Supreme Being God but have a variety of local deities to which they relate. Paul argued that of all spiritual beings, we should not attempt to deal with anything less than the ultimate head of all things, the King of kings and Lord of lords, the head of all principalities and power.

Sometimes we tend to think of false teaching as more of a problem in the time of the early church and that most of the error was coming from other religions and weird humanistic philosophies and that we are too sophisticated today to be deceived by false teachings. As a consequence, we tend to let down our guard with regard to new ideas that spring up in Christian culture. There is a battle going on now with regard to a new version of the old error of universalism. There are books being published and churches being taught that there is no hell. The idea of there being a hell does not fit their understanding of who God is and they then make a god for themselves that matches their belief system. This is just a more sophisticated version of idolatry – creating their own god but without the graven images that used to be done by more primitive cultures.

We even see evidence of a belief that those who reject God's plan of salvation and are not born of the Spirit will cease to exist when their physical bodies die. This idea has been around for ages and is sometimes expressed in terms of "when you are dead you are dead."

Remember – 2:11-15

¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Colossians 2:11–15 (ESV)

It is very difficult for a person who has grown up in a religious system that is based on observances of rites and rituals to not put their trust in these things. In Paul's day, some Jews insisted that the Gentiles had to practice the Jewish rituals and ceremonial rules to be saved. In these few verses, Paul shows that the law and the ordinances were only a foreshadowing of the spiritual reality revealed in Christ. The practice of circumcision was a foreshadowing of the work of the cross in that the fleshly nature is put away. Just as the rituals and ceremonies looked forward to the reality of the work of the cross, baptism (literally, immersion) for new converts looks back on this same reality and is symbolic of a fuller picture that we have put off the fleshly nature (died with Christ), we are buried with Christ and raised to new life. In the same way that some Jews thought there was efficacy in the rituals and ceremonies, there are people today who believe that you have to be baptized to be saved.

Paul continued with his explanation of how the cross was effective in accomplishing the work of salvation in the lives of individual Christians. The starting point for every person who is of Adam's race is that they are dead. This death is not of a corporeal (or physical) nature, even though the body is literally dying and does not have the inherent nature to live eternally. The death that Paul is writing about is a moral death in that each is alienated from God Who is the life Source.

There are two reasons for this alienation and separation from God and these are summed up in the words or concepts of "transgressions" and "uncircumcision of your flesh." We

understand transgressions to be the thoughts we think, the words we speak and the actions we take that are contrary to the will and purposes of God. In other words, these are the sins we commit. The phrase “uncircumcision of your flesh” is a euphemism for the old sin nature that we “inherited” from Adam. This means that we were dead because of SINS and because of SIN. The bottom line is that, even if we had never committed a sinful act, we would still be dead because of our heritage in Adam.

The remedy for this “death” is not something that a person can do for himself. Just as someone who needs CPR cannot give CPR to himself, a person who is dead in transgressions and the “uncircumcision of his flesh” is not capable of infusing life to himself. Since we could not do this in our own strength and by our own resources, God (in His grace and mercy) did it for us. He did two things. The **first** was that he gave us new life which addresses the “old sin nature” part of the cause of the dead condition that we were in. The only way to gain this new life is to die to the old life and be raised to the new which is pictured in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Jesus told Nicodemus that “you must be born again.” The **second** thing that was done was to address the other part of the reason we were dead and that is the issue of “transgressions” or sins. The remedy for that is “forgiveness.”

Forgiveness is pictured as destroying an IOU that we had signed and given to God as a result of committing sins. This IOU is referred to by Paul as the “certificate of debt” which was a listing of the penalties we owed as a result of sins in our lives. What is the penalty for sinning? In Ezra 18:4 and 18:20 we see “the soul that sinneth, it shall die.” Since Christ became “sin for us” and He was nailed to the cross, then Paul concluded that the certificate of debt had been nailed to the cross. Since the cross is an instrument of death, then the IOUs have been eliminated (taken out of the way) in or by the work of the cross.

In the dual acts of eliminating (putting to death) the Adamic nature and replacing it with a new (born again) nature that is characteristics of the Second Adam (Christ) and then canceling out the IOUs that were against (hostile to) us, God took away the ammunition (disarmed) the powers and principalities used to hold us in slavery or under their dominion. In effect, the cross event (death, burial and resurrection) was a public display of the victory God had accomplished in Christ.

Another way to state this is that in the Resurrection, we see the open triumph of Christ over all powers and principalities and every false way. Christ demonstrated His superiority to all other means and philosophies by His death and resurrection. All those who identify with Christ Jesus in His death are dead to the power and penalty of sin but are alive to righteousness. We are, therefore, partakers in the victory that Jesus accomplished.

If we know these things to be true – that is, if we have the doctrine of theology correct, then there are practical implications of applying truth to our everyday life experiences. We live life at the intersection of Physical Street and Spiritual Avenue and the life events that express themselves in our emotions, our intellect and our wills are plaited together in our actions that help define who we are to those who observe us.

Paul addressed two general areas that affect our actions. The first is related to religious beliefs and practices and the second is related to superstitions that are prevalent in the culture. We are to resist the pressures of letting our lives be controlled by religious-based rituals that are only representative of the reality or substance. Also, we are to refuse to let superstitions dictate what we do or avoid doing.

All those who identify with Christ Jesus in His death are dead to the power and penalty of sin but are alive to righteousness. We are, therefore, forgiven and partakers in the victory that Jesus accomplished.