

Paul's Letter to the

COLOSSIANS

LESSON 4 COLOSSIANS 2:6-15

OVERVIEW | COLOSSIANS 2:6-15

Thus far on our journey through Colossians, Paul has prayed for the Colossian church and its role in spreading the gospel (1:1-14), described Christ's glory (1:15-23), and explained his own ministry as a response to Christ's sacrifice (1:24-2:5). Here in 2:6-15 we will see that Paul refers back in other ways to 1:10-2:5 to elaborate on what he has said in that context. Everything in this section revolves around the main point of "walking only in Christ."

Paul begins this section by calling the listeners to "walk" in Christ in the same way that they received Christ (by faith). They are able to "walk" in Christ because they have been initially "rooted in Him" and on that foundation they continue to be "built up in Him and established" (2:7).

They are to "walk worthily" (1:10; 2:6), not only by focusing on the truth (2:7) but also by not being led astray by "philosophy and empty deception" (2:8). Instead, they should base their lives only on Christ (or be "captivated" by Christ instead of false teaching).

We are to root our lives in Christ because he is the only one in whom "all the fullness of God" dwells (2:9). Verses 10-11 explain the effect of Christ being the one in whom "all the fullness of God dwells in bodily form":

- (1) Believers "have become complete in Him";
- (2) "He is the head over every ruler and authority";
- (3) "In Him [believers] were also circumcised"



Christians were circumcised "by the circumcision of Christ," which occurred by "having been buried with Him in baptism" (2:11-12). Through this baptism they were also "raised up with" Christ (2:12). The next verses add that, despite their sin, their resurrection (being "made alive") was a direct result of God "having forgiven them" (v. 14).

Verse 15 concludes by mentioning an effect of forgiveness at the cross (vv. 13-14), explaining also an effect of the earlier point from v. 10 that Christ is "head over every ruler and authority." Christ reigns over all things, and through the cross he triumphed over the "rulers and authorities."

The tension in Colossians lies in what the governing influence in one's life is. Ultimately, Colossians 2 calls us to remain steadfast in the gospel which we have been taught.

Will we pursue things in life that are, in the big picture, an "empty deceit" compared to the fullness of God, which is revealed to us in Christ Jesus?

Or will we continue to live our lives, build our churches, and share the good news just as we have received it, "rooted, built up, established in the faith" of Christ Jesus, in whom the whole fullness of God dwells, and in whom we too have our fullness.

COLOSSIANS 2:6-15 (NLT)

Fullness of Life in Christ

6 And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. **7** Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.

8 Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ. **9** For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. **10** So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.

11 When you came to Christ, you were "circumcised," but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. **12** For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.

13 You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. **14** He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross. **15** In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.

COLOSSIANS 2:6-15

Paul ends last week's text with a note of warning: don't be deceived by "fine-sounding arguments." He's concerned about the relatively new Christians in Colossae being dragged away by arguments that sound convincing but are ultimately empty. Paul begins *today's* text with further instructions about these matters, encouraging the Colossians to remain rooted in Christ so that these new teachings will have no sway (2:6-12). Paul reminds them of where they were *before* God made them alive in Christ: "You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away" (2:13). In Christ, however, those powers are now disarmed (2:14-15). Paul wants the Colossians to live like they *believe* those powers are defeated (by Jesus), instead of falling into the old traps set by human thinking and the spiritual powers of this world.

ROOTED, BUILT UP, ESTABLISHED (2:6-7)

"And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him." (Colossians 2:6).

The gospel is sending us out to be God's image bearers in the world, to be agents of renewal, to do work that restores, heals, and makes whole, to seek justice and peace in a world of injustice and violence – and so we must continue to ask, "What sort of person do I need to be to do that well and to do that faithfully?"

Whenever Jesus says, "Follow me," he is essentially saying: "Align your loves and longings with mine." Becoming a follower of Jesus is more than knowing what Jesus wants you to believe. Jesus is a teacher who not only informs our intellect but also forms what we love and desire. To follow Jesus is to love what God loves, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where God is all in all – a vision also known as "the kingdom of God." To follow Jesus is to become a student of the Rabbi who teaches us how to love.

Nevertheless, our day-to-day choices are motivated by the often unarticulated goal of what we believe human flourishing is, which is strongly influenced by all kinds of cultural rhythms and routines that unknowingly shape our desires and train us to love something other than God. Our hearts are designed to find their end in God, yet many spend their lives restlessly craving rival gods and pursuing rival kingdoms.

Paul believes that the orientation of the heart happens from the bottom up (that is, our "roots/foundation" v.7). That we "continue *to follow* Christ" (v. 6) marks the progress of discipleship, the constant movement towards the kingdom. We are also to be *rooted* like a tree, *built up* like a secure structure with an *established* faith of some settled certainty (v. 7). If all we have is the movement of faith without deep roots and foundations, then we have no stability or fidelity to our lives.

Learning to love God takes practice. If we are to be a person who faithfully follows Christ, Paul says that our lives will be rooted in Christ, built up in him, and strengthened in the truth that we were taught (2:7). Perhaps his point is that consistent growth as a Christian is more about what is unseen than what is seen. Here he alludes to the importance of those unseen sources of stability and growth, using both roots and the foundation of a building as metaphors. He calls all of his readers to let their roots grow down into Christ and to build their lives on the foundation of Jesus.

Paul also encouraged the Colossians to overflow with thanksgiving. Cultivating a heart of thankfulness is one of the greatest ways to remind ourselves of all that Christ has done. Isaiah 61:3 says that instead of spirit of despair, we put on a garment of praise. Gratitude and praise are vital elements to growing in maturity in Christ. It's hard for the enemy to attack us when we are in active praise and gratitude to God. So Paul encouraged the believers in Colossae to remain rooted and established while staying thankful.

COLOSSIANS 2:6-15

CAPTIVATED BY CHRIST, RAISED TO NEW LIFE (2:8-12)

While Colossians 3 will bring the community more deeply into questions of how they are to live their lives in Christ, the remainder of chapter two is concerned about the possible eroding of the foundations, the losing touch with the roots of the faith. While the exact nature of the threat to the Colossian community remains a matter of considerable debate, there are some clear characteristics of the problem mentioned throughout the letter.

They were confronted by a combination of polytheism along with a pressure to observe the laws of the Torah. All of these new Christians had grown up worshipping the various Greek and Roman gods who govern different arenas of human life, and some simply included Jesus as one more deity that they could worship. There was also a great pressure from the Jewish Christian community for the non-Jews to complete their commitment to Jesus by following all of the laws found in the Torah, including circumcision. Thus, Paul is warning the Colossians about following teachings that are opposed to Christ.

Throughout Colossians Paul writes at length on the centrality of Christ and on the importance of the believer growing in Christ-like maturity. Here is how Paul has already described the change that Christ's death and resurrection brings for us:

Before Christ:

Domain of darkness

Alienated and hostile in mind

Doing evil deeds

After Christ's Death and Resurrection:

Transferred to the kingdom of God's beloved Son (1:13)

Reconciled to God through Christ (1:21-22)

Holy, blameless, and above reproach before him (1:21-22)

Having laid that foundation, Paul then gives some words of caution to these Gentile converts. The basis for what he's saying can be found in 1:15-20 where Paul makes clear that Christ is entirely sufficient not only for our salvation, but even for sustaining creation. Now he goes on to say that *in Christ* lives all the fullness of God in a human body (2:9); *in Christ*, the Colossians have been brought to that same fullness (2:10); and *in Christ*, the Colossians were circumcised (not by human hands) (2:11).

In verse 11, Paul does something interesting by connecting the Jewish tradition of circumcision to what happens in the heart of new Christians. This practice was a physical display that marked all who were included into God's people. Even in the OT the symbolical character of the outward sign of circumcision was emphasized: what God really desired was not the external sign for its own sake, but the circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4), an inward purification, which to Paul was the true circumcision.

In verse 12, Paul brings in the realities signified in Christian baptism. This is the only place in the NT where baptism and circumcision are brought this closely, but there are also many parallels to what Paul says in Romans 6 about baptism. And it's clear that for Paul baptism meant coming to belong to the family of the crucified and risen Messiah. In some respects, what circumcision was for the Jew, baptism was for the Christian – baptism signifies inclusion into God's people.

Baptism also reminds believers that their pre-Christian past is to be regarded as a state of spiritual death, because their sins had cut them off from a living relationship with God. Paul was convinced that to live a life in pursuit of our own selfish ends is to be in a state that leads to death. That he brings God into the analysis of the human condition gives it seriousness as a state of death, but it also provides the only hope. The conviction that the world is in the hands of a God who is the first and ultimate power is what provides the opening to freedom. In Colossians, Paul frames it in terms of "faith in the power of God, who raised [Jesus] from the dead" (2:12). Baptism proclaims that this is in fact what God has accomplished not only for Christ but also for believers: "God made you alive together with Christ" (2:13).

Colossians views Christ's resurrection as an event that brings into being and defines a whole new situation and a new community. Baptism seals our involvement with that event. Through faith and baptism, we are linked with the life of this new resurrection power. It decisively shapes and identifies us, aligning us with a new center of power and breaking the system of sin and the hold of death over our lives.

COLOSSIANS 2:6-15

FORGIVENESS AND VICTORY AT THE CROSS (2:13-15)

Immediately after Paul has talked of the Christian experience of new life inaugurated through the resurrection and experienced in baptism, he moves on to underscore God's forgiveness of all trespasses. To experience the forgiveness of sins is a sign that the hold of the past has been broken and that a new and liberated life has begun. Forgiveness remains really good news because it restores our relationship with the God who made us and our relationship with other humans. It brings a release from greed, from the need to exploit, from short-sighted self-interest, from the trap of believing that violence can be overcome only with violence, and from all those attitudes that stand in the way of God's purposes of love and justice for this world.

A resurrection faith is an embodied faith. And there is no embodied faith without forgiveness. Colossians takes us to the place of forgiveness. Something remarkable happens at the cross. Paul doesn't tell us here exactly how this works, but at the cross is nailed all that stood against us, all that held us guilty, all that would strip us of the fullness of our embodied life (Colossians 2:14). Trespasses, transgressions, and sins are forgiven. And if any of his readers have a continued sense of guilt, Paul's continued emphasis on forgiveness should remind them that the sense of guilt that has a hold over them has been dealt with in Christ, and that in God's eyes they are now forgiven and guilt-free people. The letter again and again stresses that, though we are undeserving, humans are considered worthy to receive all that God gives in Christ, and in the words of this passage, *to receive fullness in Christ (2:10)*, *to be made alive together with him (2:13)*, and *to be liberated from any accusing forces that would tell them otherwise (2:14-15)*.

And so Paul says in verse 15: "In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross." Jesus stripped the rulers and authorities of their power, and displayed them contemptuously to public view, celebrating his triumph over them. In other words, in Jesus, God did what a Roman general would do at the end of a great triumphal procession. Scholars have studied how Roman "triumph system" worked. When a general won a great victory out in the world, there must be a way to show the people back home that the victory had been won (after all, there was no social media or newspapers in ancient Rome). The general would parade hundreds of captives, cartloads of loot, their nobles who were captured. Finally at the back would be their king, and they would celebrate their triumph over him. At the end of the procession the captives would be taken into prison, but the king himself would be killed.

That's the image which Paul is using here, and it's a paradoxical image. The powers of evil are defeated not by some overwhelming display of divine power but by the weakness of Christ's death. Anyone looking at Jesus on the cross wouldn't say Jesus is leading the Romans and the authorities in a triumph. By all ordinary standards, Christ's crucifixion looks like a victory for the violence of evil powers over God's purposes. Yet Colossians can reverse this language because, seen in the light of Jesus' resurrection, the death of the victim, who has absorbed the destructive forces of the powers, becomes the point at which their domination is brought to an end.

The gospel claims that Christ has conquered evil; yet, we know that evil still threatens and flourishes. So are additional things needed to cope with the reality of evil in our world? Presumably some of the original readers were tempted to turn to other powers for help for this very reason and thought this was compatible with their Christian faith. They reasoned that their confession of Jesus' lordship needed to be supplemented by other means of coping with the forces of evil as they affected their daily lives. How far do we today still make our own deals with other powers, whether materialism, rationalism, or violence, in order to live with the impact of evil on our lives and in our world? For all readers of Colossians, a major test of our confession that Christ is Lord is whether we trust enough in the sufficiency of God's action in the crucified Jesus to stake our lives on the paradoxical power of the way of the cross rather than making compromises with other powers.

Just as Paul brings the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection to bear on his readers' perception of evil in a first-century context, so we must take the same gospel and bring it to bear on the powers of evil and perceptions of them that pose a threat to faith in our time and location (e.g. unjust social, political, and economic structures; violent use of power; ideologies of materialism, consumerism, sexism, racism, nationalism, and any other ideology that denies truth and justice and asserts that the only realities are preference and desire). When Christ died to the old order and therefore took away its power, present-day gods, powers, and principalities were included in that event. Christ's death and resurrection deals with whatever power has a hold over people's lives in our world.

DISCUSSION

1. Describe one of your favorite commercials. What makes that commercial compelling? (Perhaps your answers can be an example of how easily our hearts can be captivated by something...a natural tendency which Paul speaks to in our text this week).
2. In Colossians 2:6-7 Paul uses three word-pictures to describe the Christian life: a journey (of following Christ); putting down healthy roots; and a building being built. How have you found your life in Christ to resemble a journey? Developing healthy roots? A building under construction?
3. In 2:6-7, note that “rooted” and “established” are passive, but “walk/follow” is active on our part. What does this teach us about what it means to “follow/walk” with Christ “as you have received him”?
4. In verse 7, Paul tells the Colossians to be strengthened in their faith. He mentions giving thanks as a characteristic of strong faith. Being thankful to God reminds us of what He’s done for us and who He is. Reflecting on these things, especially in community, can encourage each of us in our faith. What’s one thing you’re thankful for this week?
5. Our response to what Paul says in 2:13-14 is to see what God has done, to agree this work has been done in our lives, and to say that our guilt and shame has no power over us. Our God has said it is finished, it’s canceled, it’s done. Because guilt and shame are powerful weapons of the enemy, why is it so imperative to our spiritual health to remember what God has done, who we are because of that work, and what we have in Christ?
6. Given that the power of evil still threatens and flourishes, what does it mean for us today that Christ disarmed the spiritual powers and authorities by the cross (2:15)? Just as Paul brings the gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection to bear on his readers’ perception of evil in a first-century context, so we must take the same gospel and bring it to bear on the powers of evil that pose a threat to faith in our time and location. Some example of modern-day powers of evil were given at the end of the lesson. Would you add others to the list? How do we bring the gospel to bear on those evils?