

The Corrosion of Faithfulness

Colossians 2:8-23

10/18/2020

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This morning, we continue our series Gospel GPS as we've been talking about the pathway for spiritual formation. What does it look like to be mature spiritually? And we've looked at several ways in which the Lord calls us to maturity. In fact, as we've noted, it is one of Paul's chief desires. The chief desire which he works toward is that the maturity of the body of Christ would grow into a greater knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ. As we have said, we can have a greater knowledge and greater convictions, but that doesn't always mean that our character has been changed by who Christ is. And so our desire for deeper formation in who Jesus is changes our character. But also, as a changed character, how do we operate in the world around us? As we have sought to follow Christ as professing believers, we have looked at the question, what are the ways in which we run into trouble? What are things that get in the way of our deeper formation in Christ, our deeper maturity in who He is?

Last week, we looked at the reality of idolatry, the ways in which both personally and culturally we can sometimes be ignorant or not fully aware of the way in which things that come from our desires become important things that then distract us from a proper worship of the Lord. But idolatry is just one side of the coin of one of the chief obstacles to growing deeper in Christ. In fact, it functions as a corrosion to faithfulness. This is one of Paul's chief concerns here in his letter to the Colossians.

As we return to this letter to this section, Paul outlines what is his chief concern for the corrosive things that are taking place and that could very well disqualify the faith of these Colossians in Christ because it isn't faith in Christ at all. It has become a composite faith. You see, the flip side to idolatry is that when idolatry isn't just a distraction but becomes an actual part of worship, and the way we understand ourselves as Christians, it becomes syncretism where we try to synchronize the ways in which God says He is worshipped, the centrality of Christ and the gospel, and trying to harmonize that or add to it things which have nothing to do with the Christian faith. This is Paul's concern.

And my desire this morning is for us to correctly see this concern that he has for the corrosive power to faithfulness, and that is the corrosive power of syncretism. Let's look at it in context. I want us to be guided by a question. The question this morning that I want us to be guided by as I read and then as we go through the sermon is this. Do we need anything that is external to the gospel? Do we need any external protection in addition to our faith in and union with Christ?

On the one hand, if you've spent any time at all with us, you might understand my answer, which I believe is Paul and the scriptures' answer, is a resounding no. We need no external help. That's great at an intellectual level because when we ask it so nakedly, the answer is somewhat rhetorical, right? The problem is that's not where we live life, however. We live life in the streets that is shaped by how we are responding to the environment around us. We are shaken in our emotions, our desires, and we feel threatened. And so suddenly at an emotional level, we are often grasping at things that will help preserve and give us power and purpose in our Christian faith. And there is oftentimes an encroaching industry of philosophy that wants to keep our eyes on these things. But all the while, it is forming, ironically, a very corrosive toxin in the system of biblical Christianity. We are not much different than our Colossian forebearers.

Let's look together at Paul's concern. Colossians 2:8-23.

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. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. 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, 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. 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, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

It is profoundly fascinating in the wisdom of Paul guided by the Holy Spirit that he ends the way that he does in this particular section of his letter as he began this section of the letter. The desire of those who have ultimately formed a self-made religion, a composite faith which is taking that which is from the tradition of men and trying to wed it to a biblical worship of who Christ is, is that corrosion of faith would not happen. But how ironic is it that the very thing which they are promoting to guard against corrosiveness is itself the toxin and the poison which is causing the corrosion? This is the power of deceit. This is the power of self-made religion and of self-righteousness.

But how are we to understand what Paul is saying here? How are we to apply it? I would ask that the team in the audio booth keep the outline up on the screens during the sermon this morning. As we will work through this, the corrosion of faithfulness happens and often is the problem for Paul. But he warns this. Do not be at all captivated. Secondly, do not be bullied. Finally, do not surrender. Do not be captivated. Do not be bullied. Do not surrender.

Remembering this question, do we need any external protection in addition to faith in and union with Christ? I believe this is Paul's implied question to which he answers in the negative with very strong language. "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition." What exactly was the human philosophy that was beginning to grow and encroach on the worship of God's people at Colossae to which he refers? You see, they were in the Lycus Valley. Being in the Lycus Valley as Gentiles, they would have been surrounded not only by the Roman Empire and all of its numerous gods and practices, but they were also surrounded by those who were of the Jewish faith but who had essentially begun to practice what we would call folk religion, taking Old Testament regulations and wedding them to the very present concerns that they had by taking on board some practices that had nothing to do with the scriptures or any obligations or commands of scripture. But they believed it provided an extra layer of protection.

We know this to be the case because of when Paul says they "worship of angels." Now, that's a disputed phrase. But really what's being called for there is a veneration of angels. It's not that angels do not exist in scripture. It is very clear that angels do exist in scripture, that to some degree they are understood by the scriptures to be supernatural servants and even emissaries of God Himself. The Old Testament is replete with it. And they were also to be understood to some degree by God's revelation to be accessible. Yet, at this point in the beginning of the early church, many within the bounds of Colossae and surrounding regions had taken this access to these angels, these supernatural beings, and began to venerate them in the hopes that by calling out particular kinds of descriptions or prayers in some practice of magical invocation that they could somehow bring about a greater protection of their faith against the evil powers in the world around them that might effect everyday life.

It isn't to say that there were angel cults. But it is very clear that in many ways they would have these little practices, these little invocations, written on papyri, and then you could carry them with you and practice them to call on them in hopes that your faith would be preserved, perhaps you would be empowered, and you would see that your purpose in the world is to avoid these evil things that are taking place in everyday life. And Paul is saying do not be captivated.

Paul's antidote to being captive and falling again back into this idea that we need to call on something outside of Christ is to ground them in the antidote of their union with Christ. And so he says in beautiful fashion beginning in verse 9, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." Now, he's already given us a great Christian hymn very poetic in his description in chapter 1. Here, in referring back to it, he continues forth, and he says all the fullness of deity that Jesus Christ in both His perfect form and His taking on a human nature is the divine Son of God. And He is a part of the Godhead. And He is God's chosen one, and in Him all the deity, all the glory, all the power, all the honor resides in His body.

He goes on to say that He is the head of all rule and authority reminding us that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ. He then goes on in verse 11 in speaking to them about what has happened at their heart level. And he's using Old Testament language of circumcision which was the Old Testament mark that you belonged to God. But the mark wasn't itself a protection against turning away from God, but it was a mark that you belonged to God. And that has been replaced, thankfully, with the blessing of the new covenant of baptism. Baptism itself does not save. It's what God does in marking us out as His own. And so Paul says in verse 11, "Also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands." It was not human made. It was not humanely commanded. This is what Christ has done. And he says you have put "off the body of the flesh," meaning it's not that you don't have a body anymore or that your body doesn't matter. It means you no longer live in the way you once did. You now live according to the one who has redeemed you.

And he goes on and says, "having been buried with him in baptism," meaning your baptism itself being washed with the water is a picture that is Christ descended to death, so you in your baptism have been baptized in the death that can only save us. He then says, "You were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead." And as Jesus was raised to life victorious over sin and death, so too are you. You are united to His victory, and what is true of Christ is true of you even though sin is still present, and we are still sinners. Yet, we have been changed irrevocably by the power of God. Why? Because of what he says next.

"And you, who were dead in your trespasses," similar to what he says in Ephesians, "and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses." And then reaching back again to the Old Testament, he tells us in this kind of language that in essence, because of our sin, we are indebted to God. And he's explaining what is one giant human I-owe-you to a holy God. God in His perfect righteousness, holiness, and glory, and perfection requires nothing short of perfection among those who He's created. And yet, because of our sin, we are indebted to that holiness except Christ who came, he says, cancelling that record of debt. It is paid in full.

And he says He nailed it to the cross. He didn't just pay it in full. He utterly crushed it by the righteousness of His death nailing it to the cross. In nailing it to the cross, He disarmed every ruler, every authority, and put them to open shame meaning anybody who's ever said in all human history that this is the way of salvation, this is the way to life, I say to you they've been put to open shame because who has ever died for someone like I have died for you and been raised to life? I have cancelled your debt. I have set you free. I have called you my own.

The antidote to being captivated by the idea that we need something outside of Christ to protect us is absurd on its face. Why? Because of the absolute irrevocable, unchangeable, unmatched glory of the power of Christ and the salvation that He brings. He reminds them that this is what we ought to be captivated by. And being captivated by it, we are freed from such absurd practices.

After verse 15, he says it's not just that we shouldn't be captivated, but we also shouldn't allow ourselves to be bullied into following these other practices. What do I mean? In verse 18, he says, "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions." Now, it's translated this way in English because it wouldn't make sense in very many other ways. But what happened is a part of this mystery religion, this mystery folk religion that was being added to the gospel, believed in the following.

It believed that if you have this little papyri, you can then begin to give these utterances to call on these angels for protection against the evil spirits and evil things that are happening in the world around us, and in so doing, you can actually graduate from having a little papyri to actually experiencing a mysterious vision. And this phrase, "going on in detail," what he means is entering into visions. This was the second stage of being initiated into this synchronistic practice, that by entering into these practices, you then can go deeper in and have these visions. And once you have these visions, you have now graduated to where you can begin to judge others.

I am indebted to the work of Dr. Clinton Arnold in his wonderful book *The Colossian Syncretism*. He says this term of entering the things or entering the visions that he has seen,

"was a technical term for a second stage of mystery initiation in which a person was led through a series of ecstatic visionary experiences. Initiates, having passed through a new and victorious life experience, believed that they had the knowledge and authority to judge others while they themselves had been delivered from the power of darkness."

You see how subtly gripping this would be.

Therefore, once you've been able to do that, now you can begin to turn to others, and you can say, this Sabbath, this festival, do not eat. Do not touch. Do not drink. This is how you preserve your faithfulness. This is how you reach a position of greater power and experience. This actually can be our purpose.

Paul's antidote when he says and describes them as being "puffed up without reason," this is again that Pauline phraseology. They are self-righteous. But they are the ones who created these stories. And they've puffed themselves up to such a point that they believe that now they can put you into this and put it on you and force you to practice. Do this, and you live, and you're valid, and you're faithful. Don't do this, then you're not really being faithful. And he simply says they are "not holding fast to the Head" because Christ, from whom the whole body of Christ is nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments grows with a growth that is from God, meaning they might have these experiences, but it's all from man. It has no value. It's empty. It is deceitful because it doesn't feed you.

And on this Lord's Supper Sunday, what a great symbol that it is Christ who before He went to the cross said I'm giving you this cup and this bread to know that what I'm about to do is for you. But this meal is a meal of celebration because I feed you, but the food that I feed you is not its amount. That's not what makes it glorious. What makes it glorious is to remember that man will not live by bread alone but

by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. It is Christ who is victorious over sin and death. It is Christ who feeds His church. It is Christ who preserves, who empowers, and who is our purpose.

So do not allow yourselves to be bullied, nor should you bully others because all you're doing is adding on to the Christian faith. And if you do, you will be disqualified because it isn't Christian faith. It's self-made religion and doesn't lead to righteousness. It just leads to further indulgence and preserves nothing.

That's what he says in verse 23, "These have indeed an appearance of wisdom." We're surrounded by evil days. The world seems upside down. Things seem to be coming at us. You need this. Practice this. This is the way. But it only has the appearance of wisdom, a self-made religion. Theirs was a form of asceticism. It led to a severity to the body, but it had no value of stopping the indulgence of the flesh, meaning the very thing that they had hoped would protect against corrosiveness was powerless to stop the corrosive power of sin. Only Christ. Let me say it again. Only Christ.

So do not be captivated. Do not be bullied. And now for my third point, we must not surrender. Paul says we are in Christ. We must not surrender to these false practices, these false beliefs, this self-made religion.

Now, this was what Paul was up against. This is the folk religion of his day. And so as I began to spend more time in this word, I began to ask the question of what value does this have for the church of Jesus Christ today? I'm certainly not aware of this kind of folk religion where people are asking Christians in and around the evangelical world or reformed church of the world to practice these kinds of things of angel veneration in hopes that through incantation we can have the preservation and power and purpose that we need.

But what do I believe is eating at not only the edges but actually causing disruption within the body of Christ? Maybe not here particularly. I don't know. That's a question you will have to ask yourself. But I will say this. Even in this last week, I've seen others use a self-made religion as a Billy club to decide who's in, and who's valuable, who's conservative, who's not, who's faithful to Christ in His church? And I believe the folk religion that is most threatening the church of Jesus Christ today is that of Christian nationalism.

Christian nationalism is this idea that if we're able to preserve America, if we're able to take back America for God, then we will have the preservation, the power, and the purpose that we need for the church of Jesus Christ to flourish. And so goes all the mythologizing which I grew up with in the south, all the mythologizing that somehow if we're able to go back to some particular age and reclaim the Christian faith and Christian America, then the church will be preserved. And so we have conferences, and we send emails. It's all over social media that if you fall afoul of believing that we need to reclaim America for God, and if you utter these kinds of phrases or words, then you are a liberal. You are not faithful to the scriptures.

Just in this last week, two prominent ministers who have vastly outsized influence for two people have begun to spread the word that if any minister of the gospel, of which I would include myself, utters such words or phrases such as racial injustice or racial justice itself is to be considered wokeness. Or if I even talk about social justice in any way, I must be driven by Marxist ideology. Or if I do not vote for the candidate which they have outlined as the only candidate for which I can vote for the preservation of a Godly American, then I myself am not being faithful to the scriptures.

This is what is feeding much of our division. It is trying to wed the Christian faith and tie the fortunes of the Christian church to whether or not the United States flourishes. This, I believe, is incredibly injurious. And it has overtly religious language, overtly worshiped figures. And this, I believe, is causing much division in families and in congregations and feeds much of the Christian cancel culture.

But I want to remind us of what the scriptures clearly say that we've already read this morning, that all the fullness of deity dwells. Now, why might I be driven to go this direction? I believe I am driven

to go this direction because of what Paul says, and I kept it for this point, in verse 9, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." But then he says something else that's amazing in the very next phrase, "and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority." He's using fullness twice. First, he's speaking of the deity fully dwells in Christ. But then he says the fullness of the deity of Christ dwells in only one place. And he changes it to the third person plural, you, the body for which He is the Head. This means that Jesus Christ only bodily dwells in all of His glory and deity and power in one institution. That is the church of Jesus Christ wherever she may be found.

This is what the good news is as one writer says.

"The good news is not that Jesus is taking America back for God. Rather, the good news is that Jesus is the Lord of peace and is at work to create a global fellowship of difference. Indeed, there is only one Christian nation in the world, and that nation is called the Ecclesia, the called-out ones, the church. It is a multicultural, borderless, weaponless, and primary context in which and through which God is working out his purposes to bring peace between man and God through the reconciliation of the cross and reconciliation among us through the body and blood and love and grace of Christ."

Nothing else. No nation. No institution outside of Jesus Christ and his church.

So let me be clear. What we must remember is this cuts both ways. Because you vote for whoever you vote for, if you're voting for Republicans or conservatives, that does not make you racist. And if you are using that as a Billy club to beat up on people on the right, that, too, has no place in the church of Jesus Christ. And it doesn't cut the other way either. Just because you might vote Democrat in no way means that you're a Marxist or that you're anti-Christian or don't care about the issue of abortion. It doesn't mean that we should not work in culture or in government or in the military or be patriotic. But what shapes all of those things is Christ and His glory. When we go and do those things, we need to do them with every ounce of gusto and passion for the glory of Christ, not for the things among themselves but for the promotion and glory of Christ alone because He's given the gifts of engineering, of government, of service all abroad among Christians.

And this is a hard saying, and I've wrestled with it over and over again. But I must say it in as clear a way as possible. The idea of Christian nationalism is not the gospel of Christ. It is a composite faith which robs the gospel of its power and creates dividing lines where they do not belong. It creates hurt and injury where it does not belong and becomes a demagoguery in and of itself.

I must remind us all that I am grateful to be a citizen of the United States of America. I am grateful for all the things from which I have benefited. But I am broken over the brokenness of this nation, and I see no one leading us in the church to a place of great health. I see a lot of war. And I am weary. I am so weary I didn't even know if I could stand in the pulpit to which I have been called to say such things. My own hands shake because I do not desire in any way to be a lightning rod.

But I believe I'm compelled to remind us that Christ has no use for cultural nostalgia, no matter the nation. And He doesn't much care for all of the things that we venerate. He simply doesn't care whether America is great or ever was or will be again. What He cares about is the church of Jesus Christ and that Christ would be made much of, and that we being deeply formed in the gospel of grace and mercy with our differences of belief and practices with regard to politics would not allow ourselves to be divided by such things because it is not what unites us. It is not what feeds us. It is not what preserves us or empowers us. And it most certainly is not our purpose.

We must protect the gospel from ever being attacked or attracted to anything other than Christ at its center. Only in Him, as Paul says, only by "holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God" that our faith might not be corroded because we're being preserved by Christ alone for His glory.

My friends, join me. Let us not be captivated by all the hubbub and the warnings and the anxieties. Let us not allow ourselves to be bullied and let us not bully one another. Let us not surrender Christ and the gospel to any nation or institution other than who He is and His church. Let's pray together.

Father, I ask you to feed your people. Unite us in the bonds of grace and mercy through the blood and life of Jesus Christ who has cancelled the debt of sin completely by nailing it to the cross. Although we are different and we have different ideas and ways in which we make choices, those in and of themselves are not what defines us but Christ alone. Lord, help us to love one another. Help us to honor one another. And we do pray for the United States of America. We pray, O Lord, for your name to be made great because your church is flourishing because we are founded, we are preserved, and our purpose alone is to glorify you. Feed your church. Protect us from captivity and bullying and surrendering for the sake of Christ. And in His name, we pray. Amen.