

Christ Reformation Church

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Hold Fast to Christ!

(Col 2:2b-3 ESV) to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

“Stand Your Ground in Christ”

Jan 13, 2013

Sermon Text: Colossians 1:15-23

Scripture Reading: Romans 10:1-13

Introduction-

The Christian is justified in God's sight through faith in Christ. Faith *alone*. Faith alone in Christ alone. If you have this faith, which is a gift

from God, then you are fully righteous by Christ's righteousness as declared by God. There is nothing else to be done.

It is finished.

(Phi 3:7-9 ESV) 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—**

So the perseverance that Scripture speaks of is a perseverance of faith. Listen to the London Confession on this-

Chapter 14, Section 2: By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatever

is revealed in the Word for it is the authority of God himself. We also perceive an excellency in the Word above all other writings and everything else in the world, because it shows forth the glory of God and his attributes, the excellency of Christ and his nature and offices, and the power and fullness of the Holy Spirit in his works and operations.

So believers are enabled to trust implicitly the truth they have believed, and to respond appropriately to each particular passage in Scripture, yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life and that which is to come.

But the principal acts of saving faith are those directly to do with Christ—accepting, receiving, and resting on him alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

14.3 This faith may differ in degree, and may be weak or strong, yet even at its weakest it is different in kind and nature (as is all saving grace) from the faith and common grace of temporary believers. Therefore, though it may be frequently attacked and weakened, it gains the victory, and develops in many until they attain full assurance

through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

God does not accept us because we are good enough and smart enough and therefore He likes us. He accepts us because of Christ, because of who Christ is and what Christ has done. By faith alone we are joined to Christ and His righteousness is ours.

And yet how easily we slide back into thinking that our standing with God is dependent, moment by moment, upon our performance. We say that we believe it is finished, yet we live as if there is still quite a lot left unfinished and it is up to us to do it.

Listen to Timothy Raymond, a pastor who wrote an article entitled *How How-To Sermons Make Our People Functional Roman Catholics*:

Somewhere along the way, Evangelicals embraced a different definition of what makes a Christian. While we once defined a Christian as someone who confesses the Evangelical gospel and gives reasonable evidence thereunto, we slowly, imperceptibly, but eventually concluded that a Christian is one who strives to follow Christian ethics. The entire core shifted from those who embrace the faith once for all delivered to the saints, to those who live a

certain lifestyle. And given this relationship, I (as a pastor) was (according to my critics) being too hard on the Roman Catholics. “If my good Catholic neighbor attends church every week, reads his Bible, sings the same doxology we sing, opposes abortion, and supports traditional marriage, does it really matter if he thinks Jesus’ body is literally present during the Lord’s Supper?” I suspect the vast majority of our church members would answer in the negative.

How did this shift in definition take place? I’m convinced that much of the blame must be placed on Evangelicalism’s preoccupation with the how-to sermon. “Six keys for raising happy children,” “Four secrets for a healthy marriage,” “Five principles for managing your money,” and so on.

Now please do not misunderstand me. Pastors must seek to apply God’s Word to Christians’ lives. To be a hearer of the Word but not a doer is the height of hypocrisy. However, a steady diet of how-to sermons devoid of the gospel, or weak on the gospel, or vague on the gospel, or that simply tack on the gospel at the very end as a sort of formality implicitly yet powerfully communicate that Christianity is a lifestyle first and a

faith second. They place ethics at the core and beliefs in the periphery.

If we Evangelical pastors desire our people to remain Evangelicals and not become functional Roman Catholics, we must fight this tendency tooth and nail. Reaffirm again and again that Christianity is a faith first and a lifestyle second.

One of our blog readers is being helped greatly by a book and she submitted some of the quotes that jumped out at her. She has just come out of a terribly abusive and controlling Pharisaical distortion of Christianity –

I really recommend the book by Johnson and VanVonderen, “*The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*”. It has taught me so much and I can see so much clearer, the mess I was in and should have gotten out of much sooner, but unfortunately, didn’t. Here are a few good quotes from the book:

“The individual is left bearing a weight of guilt, judgment or condemnation (Rom. 8:1) and confusion about their worth and standing as a Christian. It’s at this point, we say, that spirituality has become abusive”.

“It’s possible to become so determined to defend a spiritual place of authority,

a doctrine or a way of doing things that you wound and abuse anyone who questions, or disagrees, or doesn't 'behave' spiritually the way YOU want them to. When your words and actions tear down another, or attack or weaken a person's standing as a Christian—to gratify you, your position or your (OWN PERSONAL) beliefs while at the same time weakening or harming another— that IS spiritual abuse.”

“There are spiritual systems in which what people think, how they feel and what they need or want does not matter. People's needs go unmet. In these systems, the MEMBERS are there to meet the needs of THE LEADERS; needs for power, importance, intimacy, value — really, SELF-related needs. These leaders attempt to find fulfillment through the religious PERFORMANCE of the very people whom they are there TO SERVE AND BUILD. This is an inversion of the body of Christ. IT IS SPIRITUAL ABUSE.” (all emphasis mine)

And these are the very kinds of reasons that this Epistle to the Colossians is in the Bible. To protect Christ's people from these false teachers who come along and demand MORE. Who tell us that there is more to be done, and they will show us the way. Inevitably, what they are going to tell us is going

to be what Paul specifically warns us against:

(Col 2:16-23 ESV) on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 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, 19 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. 20 ¶ 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-- 21 "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)-- according to human precepts and teachings? 23 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.

These things are all incredibly easy for us to not only be deceived by, but to embrace in our own thinking and start pressing them upon others.

Paul's entire point here in Colossians is that Christ is supreme in all the

universe, that in Him we have everything God could possibly give us, that there is nothing more to do to have worth in His sight, or to earn His love. It is finished. It is done.

Listen to Paul once again beginning at 1:15 –

¶ 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.

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 1:15-23 ESV)

Notice that in verses 15-20 we have the superiority of Christ established. Last time we considered verse 15's two points, that Christ is the very image of the invisible God, and that He is superior and pre-eminent, exalted to the highest position in all Creation (firstborn).

Then, in verse 16 we are told that Christ is the Creator of all things. ALL things. Things on earth. Things in heaven. Men, animals, the earth, angels, all things.

And He is the One who raises up and tears down. He establishes all thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities. And He removes them as He chooses. The book of Daniel is a classic example of all this:

¶ All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. 29 At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" 31 While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King

Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, 32 and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." 33 Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws. 34 ¶ At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; 35 all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" 36 At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise

and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble. (Daniel 4:28-37 ESV)

Paul is telling us that this sovereignty belongs to Christ. And it extends to the unseen rulers and authorities. This is important because the false teaching the Colossians were being subjected to apparently made much of angels and intermediary beings between God's heaven and the earth. But Christ created them all and rules over them all.

(Col 1:17 ESV) 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Not only is the initial creation of all things due to Christ, but the continuing existence of all things is Christ's doing!

Therefore, Christian, if you have Christ, you have all things. If you have Christ's righteousness, you have a perfect righteousness. Because Christ is the fountain of all wisdom and knowledge, all these things are ours in Him. There is no need to go seeking them somewhere else.

Let's make this very practical-

“*Tired of Trying to Measure Up* springs from personal experience and concern over a frightening phenomenon. The great majority of the people I see in counseling are struggling with being tired. Not sleepy tired. They are emotionally, psychologically drained. More than that, they are *spiritually* tired, which is the most debilitating kind of tired. And it seems to me that most of the literature, seminars, sermons, and counseling available to Christians have one thing in common: They give already-tired people something more to do, which is exactly what they do not need. ‘Come to me, all of you who are weary and overburdened, and I will give you rest.’ (Mat 11:28)

Perhaps you too can still feel the lure of those dangled, emotional ‘carrots.’ Unwritten expectations and rules gave you a sense of shame that you as a person are unacceptable. Perhaps you are still draining away your emotional and spiritual strength as you try constantly to measure up to standards that are higher than you can reach. These standards may have become so deeply ingrained that you are not even aware of them let alone conscious of how to get free from their tyranny.

But here’s the good news – you have nothing to purchase or prove, no one to impress. What Jesus says about you is your ‘bottom line.’ You are loved,

accepted, and not alone. You are considered worthwhile and capable – by the King of the Universe! What else, who else, matters?

Healthy behaviors RESULT from an identity that’s healthy and fully based upon God’s performance on our behalf. You can learn to perform *out of* the fullness that is yours in Christ. Your acceptance and value is settled in Christ.” [Tired of Trying to Measure Up, by Jeff VanVonderen].

And there is more:

(Col 1:18-20 ESV) 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.

Not only is Christ superior over all created things in this creation, He is pre-eminent over all things in *the New Creation*. He is the firstborn from the dead. He is Head of the church because He is the firstborn of all the firstborn. The first to rise from the dead. It is through Christ that ALL THINGS in this creation are reconciled to God. It was effected by His death on the cross.

So there is no need to take directives from the Pope or from any so-called church authority that tells us we must do more if God is going to be pleased with us. What we do, we do BECAUSE God is already pleased with us. In Christ we are already reconciled to Him -

(Col 1:21-23 ESV) 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.

You WERE alienated from God. Not now. You WERE hostile in your mind. You WERE doing evil deeds. But not now. That is not who you are anymore. He has changed all that by reconciling you to Himself through Christ. He IS going to present us holy and blameless and above reproach.

What is it we do need to do? Verse 23 is the answer – don't shift from the hope of the gospel.

Metakineo -- shift, remove; figuratively and passive, as being led to give up one's confidence in

something be moved away from, be shifted away, be pushed from.

Metakineo to cause a state to cease, with the implication of force - 'to cause to cease, to be shaken from.'

Forces are applied to us. Forces designed to push us off of our faith and hope in Christ alone. Perhaps this is what having our "feet shod with the gospel of peace" means? So that we will stand firm on Christ and not be knocked off the rock onto shifting sands by the deceptions of the enemy.

So here is an "if," a condition. The New Testament teaches us that when we are in Christ, we remain in Him. And yet it also gives us these warnings so that our faith will not be shaken. And today there are many Christians who are suffering the shaking of their faith because they have been assaulted by various false doctrines just like the Colossians were. I was speaking to just such a person this last week. She said she has recently come out of a crisis of faith. It happened to her because she got caught up in a supposed sound church that lays huge burdensome loads upon its people, even ex-communicating them if they fail to comply with these man-made traditions and regulations.

Another lady I spoke to recently is in a very similar church. She said that just this past year that church has ex-

communicated several families over their refusal to submit to extra-biblical regulations. Let me give you some cautions about things that I see cropping up that characterize pastors and authors and churches that do exactly what Paul is warning us against – move people off of the pure hope of the gospel. What am I saying? I am recommending that you steer clear of churches and people who evidence these things:

- * Theonomy/reconstructionism. Insisting that nations employ the OT economy today.

- * An unhealthy, **unbiblical** patriarchy. Exaltation of fatherly, male authority in the family and church. A patriarchy that justifies men being virtual dictators in their homes. I have been contacted in just this last month by two 20 year olds who were in a crisis. Two separate cases. They wanted to do right in God's sight and honor their fathers. But what they described was abusive men, terribly controlling, self-consumed AND authorized to do so by their churches.

- * A culture that dictates, formally or informally, the details of how you are to live personally, in your marriage, and in your home. What you are to wear and not wear. What you are to eat. How often and in what way you are to have family Bible study.

The key word here is “dictates.” We aren't talking about making good suggestions or helping to instruct in a healthy way.

- * Churches that authorize only certain colleges or careers.

- * Churches that tell you what to read and what not to read. Or what Bible translation to use.

- * Churches, pastors, people who seem to have answers to and books on just about every topic you can imagine.

- * Churches in which the pastor is chief and domineering, a central and idolized personality.

- * Churches that over-emphasize the headship of the husband and the submission of the wife in marriage. Where women's studies are conducted in which women are told to submit to their husband's orders no matter what those commands might be.

- * Churches in which there are rigid, demanding models that young people are pressured to imitate. This is much different than the New Testament's instructions to all believers to pursue a holy life, obedient to Christ, honoring Him in everything we do. No, this is a condemning, performance base system

that teaches people God only approves of us if we perform adequately.

All of these things are oppressive. They add to the gospel. They attack our hope and they exert force upon us to move off of the Rock. We must never yield.

Faith alone in Christ alone. We have been reconciled to God. Don't let anyone take you prisoner to their lying philosophies that more is required.

And yet we are surrounded today in the church with people who intentionally or ignorantly attack our solid ground in Christ. Just like in Colossae. So we have to be on guard. Sometimes the attack comes from our own wrong thinking. Let's end with this challenge from Jeff VanVonderen:

When You Have to Measure Up

When I was a young Christian—all of seventeen—I had no way of knowing that I was about to turn away from almost everything I believed in—from all that people saw of me from the outside. At that time, in fact, I was president of my church youth group and avoided the guys who looked and acted like I would—just a few years later. But time was not the only factor: there was a deep, massive void within me. I could actually feel it sometimes, but didn't know what it was. You see, I

grew up in a small farming community in northeastern Wisconsin, where my family attended an independent, strong fundamentalist church. Like many churches or Christian groups, ours had a definite character: guys wore their hair a certain length; girls knew that hemlines and necklines didn't rise above or fall below certain limits. There were acceptable things you just did, and unacceptable things you just didn't do.

Even though my folks were a little less demanding about these standards, I seemed to thrive in this environment. In fact, when it came to measuring up, I was a real trophy. There was a nursing home near our town: I visited the people there regularly. There were Bible verses to be memorized: I could rapid-fire them aloud by the dozen. If I'd worn all my perfect attendance pins from Sunday school on the same day, I'd have touched off every metal detector within a 50-mile radius. My goal was to be the best, most positive person I could be.

There were, however, some "cracks" in my performance. Like the fact that, inside, I really wanted to stay home and watch Walt Disney on Sunday evenings instead of attending church. Or the fact that I could never wait to get out of that nursing home, with its medicinal-smelling old people. And no one else knew that I'd only run for

youth group president because I thought it would attract the attention of the girls. But I thought that if I kept at it long enough, I'd acquire a taste for all these good things. Maybe the worst part was that, inwardly, no matter how much I did, I still had the sense that God was disappointed in me.

I couldn't have put it into words, but it was like waiting for someone to tell me I'd fulfilled an unwritten quota and could take a breather-or like waiting for the empty spaces inside to fill in. There was one skill I did acquire by the time I left home for college: how to please people. I learned how to "read" any group I was with and determine what the standards were that would gain my acceptance.

During my four years of college and a brief stint in the army, I learned that each group-whether a family, church, or social clique-had its own standard of acceptance. So I found myself striving to earn the same sense of being "special" from any new company I was keeping. There was just one big problem: The standards had changed dramatically from what I had known. In order to "make it" in college and with my army buddies, I had to be the worst, most negative-type person I could be.

At first it was kind of bewildering to me to discover that I had so little inner

strength, so little sense of individual identity-and pitifully little resistance to falling in with what everyone else was doing. After all, I had been a youth leader. By the time I reached my early twenties, I had a full-blown addiction to drugs and alcohol. I was sick and tired of "doing good," so I gave up entirely. I burned out my physical body, not to mention my money, family, and friends. I'd become the total opposite of everything I'd stood for-in just a few short years. I no longer even tried to understand why all the good things I'd done-all those scriptures I'd planted in my brain, and all the commitments I'd made to God-had so little power to keep me from sinking into this mess.

I decided it had to be something about me. There was some kind of defect that had been there all along and was just now coming out. If Christianity could be compared to an assembly line, then I was a reject on God's conveyor-belt. Whatever I'd done to be a good Christian, it hadn't been enough to keep me that way. I was at the lowest point of my life. I won't go into all the external details of what brought me to a major turning point one night; those are important only to me. It's what took place on the inside that matters-the peace and completeness that began to filter in after all those years of struggle.

As Christians, you and I might be quick to say that I finally came to repentance. By that, we normally would mean that I made a 180-degree turn away from sin and bad behavior, and started behaving like a Christian again. But that's not exactly what happened. The truth is, the prospect of once again becoming a pillar in the religious community and starting to perform in a positive way left the taste of dust in my mouth. It felt like going back to prison. Besides that, I knew it wouldn't work. I'd been good and positive in the first place, and that only wore me down; it gave me no real life inside.

No, that night I saw something else. The first thing I came face-to-face with was my deep, abiding sense of defectiveness, which now I would identify as a sense of shame. Let me clarify something. Shame is often confused with guilt. But they're not the same. God created you and me so that when we do something wrong we experience a sense of guilt. Guilt is like a spiritual nerve-response to sin, an emotion in response to wrong behavior ("I acted in a way that was wrong, and I feel guilty"). Those uncomfortable impulses that stab our conscience are meant to turn us away from the wrong we're doing and turn us back to God. In that sense, guilt is a healthy thing. Because guilt comes as a result of something you and I do, we

can do something about it-change our behavior-and the guilty feeling will go away.

Shame, on the other hand, is not just a feeling, though we often speak of it that way ("You ought to feel ashamed of yourself"). Shame is the belief or mindset that something is wrong with you. It's something you can live with and not necessarily be aware of it. It's not that you feel bad about your behavior, it's that you sense or believe you are deficient, defective or worthless as a human being.

Consequently, you develop a shame-based way of looking at yourself. You accept the view that others might slip up and make mistakes once in a while, but they're still basically worthwhile people. You, however, are like a mirror image of that: No matter how many times you get it right (whatever it is, according to the standards of your environment) you will never be acceptable. Down deep, you believe something is wrong with you.

Because you and I are not isolated persons, we can also build shame-based systems. A shame-based system can be a family, a school, a church, or Christian group in which the authority figures demand a certain level of performance, whether spoken or implied. If you don't live up to the standard of the system, messages that

are either subtle or overt will tell you that you are not good enough-you simply do not measure up ("Shame on you!").

But that's not even the saddest part.

The Worst of All

Worst of all, a sense of shame can keep you at a distance from God. It keeps you from praying because, "Why would God want to hear from someone like me?" Or, if He does incline His ear (condescendingly), why would He answer? "I don't come close to living up to His standards. He doesn't really want to answer my prayers. He doesn't even want to be around me. At best, I'm just a spiritual stepchild."

After realizing the sense of shame I'd had for so long, the second thing I saw on the night my life began to change was this: All my life-and mostly without even knowing it- I'd been trying to measure up to the standards of other people, including my own family and my Christian environment. Even tougher, I'd been trying to live up to the standards of an utterly holy God who, I was so often reminded, could not tolerate even one whiff of sin. Hadn't He laid the sins of the whole world on His own Son on the cross, and then turned His face away? If that was true, I'd thought, then God's stomach must turn every time He even

thought about me with all the secret sins and inconsistencies in my life.

Living with that continuous sense of shame, I'd entered into a process that involved three steps: trying, trying harder, and trying my hardest. Did I say three steps? Actually, there were four: I gave up-or at least I switched the standards by which I was trying to measure myself. True, the alcohol and drugs could have killed me physically, but to be honest, even though I had been a Christian, I was already nearly dead inside. The solution to my pattern of living was not to repent-that is, it wasn't to start over and begin to live a good life. No, the solution was found in something else-something that tasted like cool clear water to my soul; and it tasted like life. It was freedom from shame! Wouldn't you like a drink from the same well?

Jeff VanVonderen. Tired of Trying to Measure Up (Kindle Locations 65-120). Kindle Edition.

THIS is the message of Colossians!
Christ alone! Faith alone! All done.
All finished.

And don't let anyone, including yourself, tell you otherwise.