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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, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

“The Terrible End of Unthankfulness, and the Blessings for those Who Give Thanks”

March 3, 2013

Sermon Text: Colossians 2:1-15

Scripture Reading: Psalm 138

Introduction-

Let's read through Colossians 2 still once more, and then I will give you an example of the very thing Paul is calling us to beware of:

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 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.

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.

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.

¹⁶ 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. 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. (Colossians 2:1-23 ESV)

This past week I received the current catalog of Christian Book Distributors. I suppose because we have been spending time in Colossians, I had a negative (and I believe, healthy) reaction to it. I mean, just look at this thing:

1. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of titles.
2. Sections such as:

- New & Noteworthy
- Bestsellers
- Favorite Authors (whole pages dedicated to a single author complete with pictures and titles)
- Favorite Women Authors
- Charismatic Authors
- More Favorite Authors
- An entire Max Lucado page
- A Church Resources (aka “holy hardware”) page, complete with a Hebrew prayer shawl with the Prayer of Jabez on it, and if that is too OT for you, The New Covenant Prayer Shawl with carrying bag
- VBS Resources
- And Bibles, Bibles, Bibles including many study Bibles with notes and commentary
- Bible study workbooks
- And more and more and more, Favorite Authors with John MacArthur, John Piper, Rick Warren, the Tim LaHey prophecy library, and Joel Osteen all thrown into the mix

together as if one is as trustworthy as another.

- Favorites for Men and Women
- Marriage favorites
- Family and Relationships
- Inspirational Reading, including “Through My Eyes” by Tim Tebow.
- DVD’s

What in the world are we to say to all of this? One fellow I know who I was discussing this with said the following:

“I wonder just how many traditions and speculations of men are contained in that catalog.”

Other people told me that they have been done with catalogs like this long ago for some of these very reasons. If they want to order some specific thing that they know is trustworthy, then they will go to the catalog, but as far as just leafing through it and “shopping,” they won’t do it because of the rank lack of doctrinal and biblical discernment evidenced by the catalog publishers.

In other words, here is a very clear, hands-on example of how we must practice the warnings and commands of Colossians 2. Lest we be taken in by the traditions and philosophies that seem so plausible, but which all draw us away from Christ and enslave us.

Let's move on in Colossians, and let's do so by noticing something that is a recurring theme in Paul's epistles, including Colossians.

Thanksgiving

In just this short letter, consider how often Paul calls upon us to be thankful:

Colossians 1:3 ESV

(3) We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,

Colossians 1:12 ESV

(12) giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

Colossians 2:6-8 ESV

(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.

(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.

Colossians 3:15-17 ESV

(15) And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

(16) Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

(17) And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 4:2 ESV

(2) Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

That is pretty amazing. We often just blow right on past these references to giving thanks. Why? Because they are so common? Because we equate the idea with mere social niceties? But recently the vital importance of thankfulness has been striking home with me. Consider these observations from George Simon's book, *The Judas Syndrome*. Here is the end of the account Simon gives of a mother, Martha, and her son, David – a relationship that had been bound for years in a very unhealthy kind of co-dependency and enablement. [NOTE: Simon refers to the Genesis Eden account as “myth.” In my conversations with him he has seemed

to be accurate in regard to Christ and the new birth. But we, of course, believe that Christ Himself regarded the events of Genesis as literal and held to the historicity of Adam, Eve, and Eden].

Martha and David eventually came to recognize how unhealthily they had leaned on (and unwittingly used, exploited, and abused) each other to avoid the distinctly personal tasks of reckoning with their disappointments and coming to terms with the deficiencies of their faith. In the process, however, they began recognizing their numerous blessings, facing the inescapable uncertainties of life, and concomitantly, intimately reengaging with and learning to trust in their God. Slowly, they exorcised from their hearts the feeling that they'd been cheated and recovered a sense of gratitude for their lives.

And as David's sense of gratitude grew and deepened, he reclaimed a sense of obligation, especially the obligation to keep himself healthy and sober, and to do something meaningful with the life and the talents he'd been given by his God.

This case really exemplifies how hard it is to be grateful sometimes. And the number of problems that can arise out of our ingratitude is quite remarkable.

The problem is actually as old as humankind. You can even see it in the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. When contemplating the Eden myth, most Christian scholars and thinkers have traditionally emphasized the disobedience aspect of our first parents' fateful transgression. As the story goes, and as so many have interpreted it, God cautioned both of them not to do something, but they did it anyway and both they and all humanity paid a dear price for their distinctive act of defiance. But little attention is given to what could have made them vulnerable to such a temptation in the first place.

Yes, they were given free will, so they had the power to disobey. And, of course, they did defy. But what would make them want to do so? They were literally living in a paradise. They already had everything (although one could argue they didn't sufficiently appreciate that fact). Still, they were somehow lured into challenging the wishes of the very One who had not only granted them life but also given them all they needed to live it happily. The serpent convinced Adam and Eve that they were cheated by a jealous Creator who didn't want them to have something he knew to be even more valuable (the awareness of things good and bad) than all they'd already been given. This is how they were so effectively seduced. Their vanity did

them in. They bought the tempter's lie that they could be like God.

When you think about it, it was really pride, the father of all sins (Thomas Aquinas), which made them succumb to temptation and abandon their faith in the Lord. A literal reading of the story also tells us that our first parents were cast out from Eden as a result of their transgression. But as John Sanford points out (The Kingdom Within, 70– 81; Mystical Christianity, 137– 39), **it's simply impossible for God to rule where vanity already reigns. So the bigger truth revealed in the garden myth is that God's will and human vanity can never occupy the same space, especially in the heart.** Looking at it that way, Adam and Eve weren't really driven out of paradise by a jealous and vengeful god. Rather, in their vanity, they locked themselves out of the Divine presence.

And that vanity was still very much on display when, instead of accepting responsibility for their actions and the consequences, they started pointing fingers: first Adam at Eve, then Eve at the serpent and his power of deception.

In my many years of working with folks struggling with character issues, I've seen more problems arise out of a person's false pride or vanity than just about any other

personality defect. Humility and gratitude are absolutely essential to cultivating a sense of obligation. A lack of humility and gratitude inevitably begets a sense of entitlement and unrealistic expectation. And only when we truly appreciate what the ultimate Gift Giver has blessed us with can we acquire a sense of responsibility to give something back.

What we do with the many gifts we are given, and how we value the many blessings bestowed on us is absolutely crucial to our character development.

And there's research that shows that gratitude is really good for us in other ways (Emmons and McCullough, The Psychology of Gratitude; Emmons, Thanks! How the Psychology of Gratitude Can Make You Happier). But in a world of plenty, it's easy for our sense of appreciation to wane and quickly evaporate when trials appear. You can get pretty bitter when you believe you're owed something in the first place and then bad things happen.

When people undergo ordeals of the kind Martha and David experienced, it's inevitable that both their faith and their characters will be tested. Only a blessed few seem to be able to get through such trials (by the grace of God) with no adverse effects, and even fewer approach them with the

anticipation of being strengthened in faith and in character.

How a person views this wondrous gift of life, with all its uncertainties and challenges, appears to make the difference. And what one feels obliged to do out of gratitude for this precious gift matters even more. When David reclaimed a sense of gratitude, it was natural for a sense of obligation to follow. He took stock of his talents, stopped feeling sorry for himself and his weaknesses, and became a productive member of society. He even came to a place in his heart where he could not only accept but also actually embrace hardship. He felt vital again. And he had no use for the instant relief from all pain he once found in alcohol and drugs.

Dr. George K. Simon, Jr. (2013-02-01). *The Judas Syndrome: Why Good People Do Awful Things* (Kindle Locations 890-904). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

Consider the dynamics of this sin of unthankfulness as Simon has pointed them out:

Pride → Unthankfulness → entitlement and unrealistic expectation → anger and bitterness (and turning to various idols to get what we think we deserve, ie, alcohol, drugs, sex, greed, etc)

In contrast:

Humility → Thankfulness →
Obligation to God and others →
Contentment

Suddenly this matter of being thankful is much more important, is it not? Listen now to this very dynamic of unthankfulness playing itself out as described by Paul in Romans 1. Carefully note the progression or rather de-gression of those who refuse to acknowledge and give thanks to God:

Romans 1:1-32 ESV

(1) Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,
(2) which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures,
(3) concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh
(4) and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,
(5) through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations,
(6) including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

(7) To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

(8) First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

(9) For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you

(10) always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

(11) For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you--

(12) that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

(13) I want you to know, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

(14) I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.

(15) So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

(16) For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

(17) For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

(18) For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

(19) For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

(20) For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

(21) For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

(22) Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

(23) and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

(24) Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

(25) because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

(26) For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature;

(27) and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

(28) And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

(29) They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,

(30) slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

(31) foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

(32) Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Let's each one of us now be soberly warned. If you are here this morning fundamentally believing that you are entitled, that you are owed, then pride reigns in your life. In addition, you are therefore at some point in this downward slope that ends in hell.

Children and young people, let me speak to you specifically – not so much because adults cannot be in this very situation, but because you can still save yourselves a life of grief and misery if you will listen now. Let me just lay it out here –

Some of you are unthankful. You may well think that you are owed. We call this attitude, *entitlement*. You have heard me use that word many, many times in past few years as we have studied the evil sin of abuse. Think about what this word means:

En-titled.

What is a title? It is the idea of ownership. A title is a document that says you own something. So the notion of entitlement is a word that describes an attitude that *you have the right to own things. That things are*

owed to you. That other people are obligated to you. Like your brothers and sisters, or your parents or friends, or the world, or this church. And ultimately, what does this really mean is going on in your thinking? –

You believe that God owes you.

But what is the truth? YOU owe God! You owe Him thankfulness. Every good thing you have is a gift from Him. Your family, your clothes, your food, the fact that you have heard the gospel, all of it!

Now, if a person – if YOU – are refusing to give thanks to God, then really you are thinking that YOU should be God, not God! That is what Satan told Adam and Eve, right?

Genesis 3:5 ESV

(5) For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

AND THIS IS WHY THE VERY BEGINNING OF THE FALL INTO HELL BEGINS WITH UN-THANKSFULNESS AND AN ATTITUDE OF ENTITLEMENT.

And it is the very thing Paul is warning us against here in Colossians. If a person, if YOU think that you are entitled, that you are owed, then like

Adam and Eve you are going to listen when the devil comes along.

How is he going to come to you? He is going to come as one of these people who offers you some philosophy or worldview that pulls you away from Christ. After all, if you are not thankful to God for Christ, then you will not cling to Christ. You won't admit that you have everything in Christ already. You won't be thankful. You will still want more because you think you are owed more.

Anyone who refuses to be thankful, who refuses to give thanks to God, is a person who God is going to eventually just give over to sin.

Romans 1:28-32 ESV

(28) And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

(29) They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,

(30) slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

(31) foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

(32) Though they know God's decree that those who practice such

things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

Did you notice the phrase I underlined? Children and young people, - are you disobedient to your parents? Do you think that you are the greatest and are you angry because your family isn't giving you your way and everything that you want? Well, now you know the reason why you are thinking like this – *it is because you are not giving thanks to God for all things, including the fact that you are even alive.*

And if you continue with this attitude in your life, God will keep pulling away from you until one day, He will leave you forever.

Listen to Dr. Simon once again –

When There's No Room in One's Heart for God

For God to dwell in us, we must first make a space for him. But some people simply have no space in their hearts for a power greater than themselves. Oh, they might outwardly profess a belief in God. Sometimes, they will even 'protest' some kind of religious conviction to the point of near absurdity. But in the deepest recesses of their souls, they can barely even *conceive* of a power greater than

themselves, let alone *turn themselves over* to one. The very idea of humbling and subordinating themselves – in complete faith and trust – to the unseen, incomprehensible, great I AM is anathema to them. The various gods these folks truly worship and their lack of faith in the one true source of life most often come to light when circumstances put their characters ardently to the test.

Chief among the gods that egotistic or narcissistic characters worship is the grandiose image they have of themselves. They regard themselves as inordinately 'special' and view nearly everyone else as pathetically inferior. They are often so convinced of their special status that they feel entitled to do whatever they please in their dealings with those they perceive are beneath them.

And because they have no concept of anything more powerful or important than they are, there's nothing in their mental or psychological framework to inhibit them from selfishly using and abusing those around them.

Unthankfulness. No wonder Paul tells us about this so often! The unthankful person is already some distance down the Broadway that ends in hell. In contrast, consider the blessings of the heart that gives thanks to God –

Psalms 118:1-29 ESV

(1) Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

(2) Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

(3) Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

(4) Let those who fear the LORD say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

(5) Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free.

(6) The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?

(7) The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

(8) It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.

(9) It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.

(10) All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

(11) They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

(12) They surrounded me like bees; they went out like a fire among thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

(13) I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me.

(14) The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

(15) Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the LORD does valiantly,

(16) the right hand of the LORD exalts, the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!"

(17) I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

(18) The LORD has disciplined me severely, but he has not given me over to death.

(19) Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

(20) This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

(21) I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

(22) The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

(23) This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

(24) This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

(25) Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!

(26) Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD.

(27) The LORD is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us. Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!

(28) You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God; I will extol you.

(29) Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!