

The Preeminence of Christ Demanded

Colossians 2:1-7

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Paul has been giving the leading principles that guided him in his work with all the churches. This pattern of apostolic ministry was explained to the Colossians so that the church might have *a standard of comparison* against which to measure the style of the new teachers.

It seems likely that the visitors had cast doubts on the completeness of the Christian message as delivered to the Colossians by Epaphras. Since the young church had never yet seen or heard the great apostle in person, it would be easy for these new and enthusiastic critics to drive a wedge between Paul and his fellow servant. The impression could be given that there was considerably more in Paul's gospel than Epaphras had yet reported. So the Colossians would be bewildered, wondering whether or not what they had heard was an adequate account of the apostolic message. (Adapted from Lucas, p. 30,)

Colossians 1:24-29 (NLT):

I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am participating in the sufferings of Christ that continue for his body, the church. God has given me the responsibility of serving his church by proclaiming his entire message to you. This message was kept secret for centuries and generations past, but now it has been revealed to God's people. For God wanted them to know that the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too. And this is the secret: Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory.

So we tell others about Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all the wisdom God has given us. We want to present them to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ. That's why I work and struggle so hard depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me.

The Purpose to Achieve in Christ (v.1-3)

What is it that Paul and Epaphras are struggling for? What is their aim, their purpose?

2 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.

Its Great Importance (v.1)

That struggle is Colossians 1:28–29 ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” The mighty struggle is to present believers mature in Christ.

Why would Paul want them to know how much he struggled for them? They have never met him. They know of Paul’s ministry through Epaphras. It might even come as a surprise to them that they, as a gathered people, are cared for and struggled over by the Apostle. He is saying this to impress upon them how important growing up is. He wants them to grow up *in the way that is true*. The traveling teachers are offering a false alternative. That they are in danger of adopting wrong ways to live the Christian life is of great, great concern.

Its Unifying Intent (v.2a)

Paul’s great concern is that they would be unified. Why is that a concern? The traveling teachers with their unbiblical teaching are dividing the people. Error tends to do that. People think they have an inside track on spirituality. This leads to serious discussions even arguments. Then people stop talking to people they disagree with and usually start talking about them. The “spiritually elite” begin to look down others. Love wanes. Division grows. People leave. Everyone wonders what happened. This is what alarmed the Apostle Paul.

How will this unification come? Through their souls, their hearts being knot together in love. In the context, Paul has expressed a great concern for their commitment to the truth in Christ. Now he struggles for their unity in love. Truth and love are not in conflict. They are partners. Love without truth is sentimentality and maybe even a deceit. Truth without love is data and maybe even a knife. But truth and love are godliness. They are the essence of a relationship, of being knit together.

What then is at stake? Their unity. The false teaching will divide them and discourage them in their relationships. But truth in love will bind them together. Does Paul expect everyone to believe exactly the same things? No, but everyone should be in a process toward knowing, believing, and understanding the Word, and thus growing in knowing the Lord. Love then holds us together while we are in the process of growing up. Therefore, error is dangerous. It divides. It makes a breach in love. Truth unites. Error divides. The people teaching the error about how to live the Christian life are in fact harming the unity in Christian living.

Its Assuring Instruction (v.2-3)

What is needed then is encouragement to reach forward and upward to a goal. The hearts of the people should be knit together in love. They should be encouraged have all the riches that comes from an assurance that they understand and that they know for certain God's true mystery. That is, they should be encouraged to know and understand Christ.

The heart of Christian living is knowing a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. The true Christian needs confidence that knowing Jesus will bring maturity. So, we should be encouraging people along these lines so that they will begin to have the kind of assurance that they should have. That confidence will come as they grow more and more in God's true mystery. They should not be wasting time, energy, effort trying to understand the ideas of the traveling teachers. Many, even today, are presenting unbiblical alternatives to Christian living. Most are either a form of legalism or mysticism. The true mystery for Christian living is an open, revealed truth. It is all we can know about Jesus.

Why is this? Because "in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." This is an amazing assertion. Since Christ is the pattern, the prototype, the creator, the sustainer, the sovereign, the sufficient one, the fullness of God, the exact image of God, the Divine Son then all wisdom and knowledge is revealed in Christ. I don't think this has been explored enough. But certainly, in the context, Jesus is all that we need for understanding the Christian life and living the gospel life.

It is hidden in Christ. What must be known is the way that Jesus is the center of God's plans and purposes and providences. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament; He is the centerpiece of the Scriptures. He is supreme and sufficient as our redeemer and ruler.

The Problem to Address in Christ (v.4-5)

What is the danger for Christians?

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.

Kent Hughes writes, "How is it possible for one not to be sucked in by a philosophy which is subtly deceitful in its language, logically compelling within its system of reason, and enticingly moral?" (Hughes, p. 71) The answer is that Christ is the standard against which all human systems of wisdom are to be measured.

His Warning Cautions (v.4)

In what Paul has said so far, he fully expects to inoculate us against the false teachings of legalism and mysticism. Christians are supposed to be a people who believe the truth and thus become less and less susceptible to error. But too often, the truth is not taught, the Word is not explained, Jesus is not seen as supreme and sufficient. The false teachers then can and often do win the day. Just walk into any religious bookstore (if you can find one) and look at the bookcase after bookcase on elements of the “Christian Life”. An Amazon search in the Books section on “Category: Christian Life” returned 884 results. Were all bad? No, of course not. But there were a lot that would easily fit into the categories of legalism (usually under the rubric of “Ten Steps to” or mysticism, usually with an appeal to the affections, naturalism, or outright spiritism. Many were books that purported to be about the Christian life in gardening, cooking, sewing, arranging flowers, grilling out, being a tough man-warrior Christian. Many of the books were outrageous. An example? *How to Transform Your Mind and Gain Miraculous Powers*. Yes, it was a book about the Christian life and ministry. I read the summary of about a dozen of them. Most of them announced that the author would teach you hidden or new insight and wisdom into how to live the full, holy, satisfying, and even, happy Christian life.

This is exactly what worried Paul. This is what he and Epaphras (Colossians 4:7) struggled in praying and preaching against. This is the kind of stuff I have fought for 30 years. Yet, some of you will almost assuredly have bought into a series, a sequence, a spiral of these wrong ideas. You know what makes it worse? You expect to hear those kinds of things from this pulpit. Well, by God’s grace, not ever...

How this happen? Look at what he says. “No one delude you, or deceive you, with arguments that seem to make sense, plausible arguments...” Note a couple of things.

The error is being argued for... There is a rational, logical argument being made. Legalism and mysticism have many ancient and modern ways of being argued for.

The ones making the argument mean to win you to their view... Since they are convinced they are right, they intend to get you to agree with them.

The argument sounds like it makes sense... They present it in a way that is meant to be persuasive. It sounds good. It makes an emotional appeal. It may make perfect sense. But it is just wrong. Logic is not a test of truth. Many errors are simply logical implications from texts. That does not make them true.

The end game is that you will be deceived and probably not even know it... Sadly, people are deluded into accepting the error of legalism and mysticism. You become deceived. You may be convinced. Both of these alternative views of the Christian life have a long and unhappy history.

One writer commented, "The mark of these teachers, therefore, was that although their matter was false, their manner was such that people readily believed them. Their listeners were carried away by the eloquence and skill with which their case was presented. A more critical attitude towards what they said might have shown up the flaws in the argument. But people were in no mood for analysis when what they heard charmed and captivated them. The inevitable result followed; those who gave heed to these impressive and high-sounding speakers were *deluded* by them." (Lucas, p. 84)

Then, people start talking about their discovery. They think of themselves now as spiritually superior, and gather up a following. So, love wanes and even ends. Division rises. Paul's warning is not heeded. People lose confidence. People start questioning the truth. People stop loving one another. Conflict arises. And Satan wins. Is that what you want?

His Encouraging Confidence (v.5)

Despite this strong warning, Paul strikes a note of happy confidence and encouragement.

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.

The prison is keeping Paul away from them. The report from their evangelist and founding pastor has brought Paul close to them. He is far away in Rome. But he is near through the eyes, ears, and report of Epaphras. A danger has been reported. But so far, the church has generally held fast.

They have stood together in good order, like an army standing in array against the enemy. The use of the military terms is intentional. We are to see that we are in war for truth. So, we must stand together for the truth. Those who are trying to persuade you away from the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ *must be resisted*. Epaphras has evidently made this good report about the church he loved much.

The people are standing together. What does that look like? They are remaining firm in their faith in Christ. There are firmly believing that Christ is to be believed and submitted to in order to be pleasing to God in all the Christian life. Legalism and mysticism may sound good in their respective arguments, but they will move you away from your faith in Christ. Your trust, faith and dependence will shift to Law or personal religious experiences.

The Precept to Walk in Christ (v.6-7)

The conclusion then becomes a command. Since these things are so, then here is what you must do.

⁶Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Lucas summarized this verse so well:

Paul gives the Colossians three guiding principles, each referring to a different aspect of Christian development, but similar in form.

1. As you received ... so live.
2. As you were rooted ... be built up.
3. As you were taught ... be established in truth.

These principles refer respectively to godly living, spiritual growth, and Christian understanding. (Lucas, p. 87)

What is the Biblical way to think about the Christian life? Here it is. It is no secret. It is easy to say. Yet sadly, we are often ignorant of it. Why? Because since the Reformation era, unbiblical legalism and mysticism have become so common that the Biblical way sounds strange to our ears. It is almost like hearing a foreign language.

⁶Wie ihr nun den Christus Jesus, den Herrn, empfangen habt, so wandelt in ihm, ⁷gewurzelt und auferbaut in ihm und gefestigt im Glauben, wie ihr gelehrt worden seid, indem ihr überreich seid in Danksagung!

When what you expect to hear, is not what the Bible says nor is it what we preach, then it will be difficult to understand. Listen very carefully to what is being said to us...

Its Foundational Command (v.6)

The command is grounded in a comparison. In the same way that you received Christ Jesus as Lord, then you must live the Christian life in the same way. You began with faith. You continue with faith. You receive the Christ as Lord. You accepted, affirmed, confessed that Jesus is supreme and sufficient for your salvation. Now, you receive, confess, affirm that Jesus is Lord, that is, He is supreme and sovereign over every aspect of your life.

You live the Christian life the same you started it. If you started it any other way, you are not a Christian. This may explain why many who profess faith struggle so much to live the Christian life. As an unbeliever, you cannot live the

Christian life as God intends. Therefore, you are probably trying everything else since you cannot do it God's way.

Kent Hughes writes, "This is also true of virulent forms of legalism and some of the extreme forms of the "prosperity gospel" which eat away at the fringes of evangelicalism. The safeguard against this is a perpetual bowing before Christ Jesus, the *Lord*, in line with our initial awareness that we are Christ's and our sins are forgiven." (Hughes, p. 62)

Its Functional Implementation (v.7)

Our walk in Christ is to be by faith. What does this mean? It means that our whole life is to be lived by conscious intentional believing what the Bible says. We began the Christian life by believing and bowing to Jesus. We live the Christian life by... believing and bowing to Jesus.

Remember what the Bible teaches us about faith. Faith has classically been spoken of as knowing, affirming, trusting, and resting in what God in the Bible says. These are good clarifications that are true to the Bible and help us much. There are other helpful clarifications that accord with the Bible as well.

Faith knows, affirms, trusts and rests in statements of truth and statements of command.

Faith believes statements of truth in way that transforms the way one thinks. It is fundamental to renewing the mind.

Faith believes statements of command in a way that obeys what is being directed.

Faith grows in wisdom as believing and bowing become more and more skilled in making wise choices in every area of life.

All humans believe. They know, affirm, trust and rest in ideas. But that natural, human belief cannot save. This is why many people can profess "faith" while not being saved. It is natural, human belief. Saving faith is a gift of God. It is spiritual belief and submission enabled by the Spirit of God. The person who is not saved (the natural person) cannot have faith in the Bible, gospel, sense.

It is likely then that your understanding of faith is incomplete and small. It needs to be expanded to incorporate all that the Bible teaches about faith.

So, what does that look like?

It is everything we have seen in the context. Knowing God's will. Growing in practical wisdom. Learning how to be pleasing to God in all areas of your life. Affirming and acting under the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus.

It is learning and living what the Bible says. Yes, yes, I know. You all do. But the simple fact is most don't. Many practical commands will be coming later in the book. The fundamental question is, "Do you believe them?"

It is trusting Jesus in and for everything. Anxious? Fearful? Grumbling? Are these the products of trust in Jesus or trust in something else?

It is bowing to Jesus. It is bowing to His commands. It is bowing to His providence. It is learning to accept with humble submission what God chose to bring into your lives.

Our growth in Christ is multifaceted. It is like a plant... rooted in Christ. It is like a building... built up moment by moment, truth by truth, situation by situation. It is like a foundation... establish, strong, unmovable.

Our growth in Christ is growing in faith. To grow as a plant, as a building, with the foundation on Christ, we have to be growing in the faith.

There can be no deviation from the Apostolic teaching. Paul is expressing real confidence in what Epaphras has taught them. What they have been taught is sufficient to be pleasing to the Lord. Any movement away will cause them to become displeasing to the Lord. This is a sobering thought. When you try to live in legalism or mysticism then you will not and cannot be pleasing to God. It may feel spiritual. It may feel holy, but it is neither.

How can you know that we are pleasing the Lord in all your lives? How can you know that you are believing and bowing to Christ as Lord? How can you be sure that you are knowing God's will and increasing in spiritual wisdom and understanding? You abound in gratitude. You are overwhelmed with thanksgiving. You are deeply content in Christ. Oh, all may not be well. Things may not be good. People may not be living up to your expectations. But your heart is ruled by Christ and His grace and therefore you have a deeply settled, contented, gratitude.

There it is, isn't it? Many of you are struggling with discontent, grumbling, critical spirits. Your heart is not at rest in Jesus. You do not sit with abounding gratitude under the supremacy and sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ. You may think you believe in the centrality of Jesus. You may even argue for the unswerving grace of God's providence. Yet, you do not abound with thanksgiving. Dearly beloved, where there is abounding grace, there will be abound gratitude.

Reflect and Respond

I am going to let Dick Lucas have the final word, today.

To be bursting with thankfulness is a true witness of the Spirit within us. For the voice of thanksgiving speaks without ceasing of the goodness of God. It claims nothing. It sees no merit in man's receiving but only in God's giving. It marvels at his mercy. It is the language of joy just because it need look no longer to its own resources. It is an expression of dependence on another. It is the speech of the Psalmist and is the natural tongue of the apostles. It is also heard on the lips of the 'weakest Christian on his knees'.

Here is a fine test by which we may test the authentic quality of our spiritual growth. To be 'filled with gratitude' is to be 'filled with the Spirit of Christ'. The Christian rejoicing in this blessing of a thankful heart will have his eyes fixed upon the right person and the right place, Christ at God's right hand. He cannot be taken up with himself without being immediately reminded that everything he possesses is the gift of God. The only thing which he can claim to be filled with, which comes from himself, and which he can offer to God, is gratitude. (Lucas, pp. 93-94)

Here is the essence of the Christian life. Colossians 1:28-2:7 [NLT - revised and adapted]

We preach to you about Christ, warning you and teaching you with all the wisdom God has given us. We want to present you to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ. That's why we work and struggle so hard, depending on Christ's mighty power that works within us.

We want you to know how much we have struggled for you and for many other believers. We want you to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. We want you to have complete confidence that you understand God's mysterious plan, which is Christ himself. In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

We are telling you this so no one will deceive you with well-crafted arguments. We want you to be pleasing to God. We will be so full of joy when you are living as you should and when your faith in Christ is strong.

And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. 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. Then, thanks be to God, you will overflow with thankfulness.