

“Colossians”

Summer Series 1

Lesson 7

“Colossians Makeup and Review”

Objective: To understand the message that Paul meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21st century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis on application.

Materials: I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Colossians, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, and any other sources along with the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding for our contextual situation.

Procedures

- 1.** We will begin by translating the text from Greek into English. I do not here give you that full translation here, though there are excerpts.
- 2.** We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural and social settings in order to understand the message Paul intended and that God still intends for us.
- 3.** From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the calling that Paul has for the early disciples to our modern contextual framework in order to do our very best to live as disciples of Christ in our modern era.
- 4.** We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

Lesson

This week we have the opportunity to catch up if a class has missed a week for some reason. If not, then perhaps this is a week to go back and focus on something that you did not have enough time for previously. Finally, this week presents the opportunity to tie everything together and address the ways this letter might challenge each of us to live in a different manner because of the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the example we have been shown by Jesus and Paul. You may have some specific things that you want to cover. If not here are some notes to help remind you of the previous weeks.

Review

Week 1

Colossians is one of Paul's shortest letters, but it is also one his most exciting, written to a young church discovering for the first time what it means to follow Jesus. It seems apparent that Paul shares their sense of wonder and their excitement as he writes in such evocative and provocative language. It must be noted however, that this letter was written to a particular people, and to a particular set of circumstances, in a particular time. Without this contextual anchor it is virtually impossible to avoid drifting into all sorts of interpretations that were not the intent of Paul in writing this epistle. Some of that

might work fine for us, but we should start with the intent Paul had for his audience and what they will have likely understood from Paul's letter.

Within the overall direction of the arguments of this letter two features are prominent (1) the central position of Jesus Christ and; (2) Paul's theological challenges that are most likely addressed against Judaism in some form, for the most part.

The masterstroke in Paul's argument rests in the classification of Judaism as if it were "just" another religion, like the other pagan religions. He classifies it as if it is a "philosophy" that was developed by human tradition (2:8-22). This hypothesis has three particular strengths. (1) The underlying view of the place of Jesus Christ, in this letter, is that Jesus has taken the position that the Jews had formerly assigned to the Law. With this in view, the new converts possessed all that they needed and Judaism now had nothing more to offer them toward their salvation (2:21-22). (2) A contrast with Judaism adds significance to several passages in the letter. Paul's argument amounts to a redefinition of the central Jewish doctrines of monotheism and election. Paul declares that the church has had its own "exodus" and therefore is the true heir to the promises of God with regard to the greater "Promised Land." In chapters 2 and 3 Paul stresses the fact

that the church already lives in the “age to come” that had been anticipated by the Jews and therefore there is certainly no obligation to submit to regulations that were intended to be a preparation for that other age.

Also (3), this position enables us to understand the many significant parallels between Colossians and several other Pauline passages, such as Galatians 3-4, Romans 7:1-6, Philippians 3:2ff. and 2 Corinthians 3-5. In each of these passages Paul contrasts Judaism and the Gospel message in ways that will have been relevant to the Colossians and first century audiences. This brief summary may make the task of understanding Paul’s letter sound simpler than it actually is. There are some notoriously difficult things for us to understand and many of them are hotly disputed amongst scholars.

It is important to make an effort to try and identify the nature of the teachings and concerns that Paul seeks to address with his Epistle to the Colossians despite this being a notoriously difficult task. If this is not done, the words that Paul uses are ripped from their moorings and can be used in almost any context to say almost anything. It appears that Paul sought to protect the Colossian Christians either from actual syncretistic teachings, or

the prospect of such teachings that were in some sense Jewish in nature. The objections to the idea that these teachings opposed by Paul are Jewish in nature most often take the ideals of Judaism as they have been handed down through the official Jewish sources as the standard for comparison. This does not in fact reflect the reality of first century Judaism, just as such ideals do not reflect the reality of a monolithic form of Judaism in our own time.

Paul seems to include Judaism, of the first century, under the same category that would also include pagan philosophies of that same era. They are human in origin, not that the Jewish law was human in origin, but the practice and interpretation used by those practicing Judaism was human in origin. As such, this Judaism was of no greater value than the other human philosophies in bringing about salvation, or true reconciliation with God. This reconciliation was only possible through Jesus Christ. The faith, hope, and love of the Colossians are a demonstration of the creative power of God at work in them. They are a new creation in a way that is very much reminiscent of the original creation of Genesis chapters one and two.

The Jews living in Asia Minor, during the first century, were subject to the same pressures and temptations as the pagans living around them. There are a number of indications that at least some had succumbed to these temptations and become syncretistic in their beliefs and practices, or that there was at least this potential. They had blended Judaism with other philosophies and with the traditions of men. There was pressure from these people, and perhaps even from those that were more orthodox, to accept additional beliefs and practices, beyond what was clearly stated in the Law. Paul rejects such claims with considerable fervor. There is no need to supplement the truth with anything. The results of the gospel, that they heard through Epaphras, are plain to observe and by adding other things to the truth, the truth is thereby obscured.

Paul leads into the full argument of his Epistle by introducing himself and laying out his credentials as the authoritative messenger of God and of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. He introduces along-side himself, Timothy, and then greets the Colossians and informs them of his prayers on their behalf; and he prays based on the reports he has heard of their faith, hope, and

love in the Spirit. He praises them for the fruit that is being borne in them as it has been in the other places where the Gospel has been heard and comprehended.

Week 2

As we come to lesson 2 in this series we come to the second part of Paul's extended thanksgiving, which continues in verses 9-14. Notice the plural "we" with reference to the prayer that is being given on behalf of the Colossians. This certainly includes at least Paul and Timothy.¹ Paul begins this section by noting his constant concern for the Colossian Christians, indeed since the day they heard of them. The thought here of not ceasing to pray for them parallels "always" in verse 3 and refers to his deep concern for them.

We all know, or have known, people that retain a joyful demeanor no matter the circumstances. Their attitude is not determined by their environment. Their environment is effected by their attitude. Such people are often seen as a breath of fresh air, a light in the darkness. Is that how people perceive you? Do you think this is the way Jesus would have been perceived? How

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, in *The New International Greek Commentary series* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. 67.

does such a person change your perception of circumstances?

Jesus came into this world to change things; those that are His disciples will continue that mission of change. We are to reflect the attitude and countenance of Jesus. When people see you do they think about Jesus?

In the beginning of this section Paul continues the prayer that he began for the Colossians in the previous section and expresses the desires he has for them in terms of this prayer to God. He desires for them to be filled with knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. He desires this not simply for the sake of these things in some existential way, but in order that they may live lives that are worthy of the calling; to live lives that are “pleasing” to God. This “pleasing” life will be characterized by the fruits of good works. The strength and patience to bring about these good works will come from God and these works should be brought forth joyfully, giving thanks to the Father who has enabled them to have an inheritance in the light. They have been rescued from the tyranny and slavery of darkness and transported into the reality of the kingdom of His Son where redemption and forgiveness are the hallmarks.

Paul then lays out for them the credentials of this Christ of whom Paul speaks and He transports them into the realm of light. This Jesus represents the wisdom of the invisible God in physical form. He is the source of, and the sustaining force, for all that has been created both in heaven and on earth. He is the first from the dead and in Him the fullness of God was “pleased” to dwell. It is through Him that the reconciliation of the world, back to God, will take place and this is demonstrated in the giving of his blood and the suffering of the cross.

For those who once were hostile and separated from God reconciliation has now taken place through the death of Jesus. This has come about through the act of Jesus and allows those who accept the Gospel to be holy, blameless, and irreproachable before God. It is of this Gospel that Paul is a servant.

Paul now expresses, starting at verse 24, his interest in the Colossians. He conveys to them teaching regarding the body of Christ and how his suffering is a continuation of that which Jesus suffered while on earth. Since he is a part of the body of Christ his sufferings are in fact to be viewed as a continuation of Christ’s sufferings and he rejoices in them as a mark of his connection to

Christ and as a continuation of Christ's willingness to suffer for others. It is through Christ that the mystery of God is revealed and Paul is an instrument in that revelation, especially to the Gentiles. Paul is empowered for this mission by God Himself.

Week 3

Paul begins this section by letting the Colossian Christians know how much he is struggling for them, even those he has not met face to face. He does this so that their hearts will be encouraged and so that they will be "united" in love with him and with one another. This concept of unity, of being a group, is extremely important and it is all focused at the point of the mystery of God, which is Christ. It is here that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are located. He tells them all of this so that those who might use seemingly plausible arguments might not deceive them. He calls upon them to stand firm despite his absence from them in the body, and he praises them for their high morale and firmness of faith.

Starting at verse 6, he continues to encourage those who have received Christ Jesus to live their lives strongly rooted and established in faith, always with thanksgiving. He warns them not

to be taken captive through philosophy, or human tradition, which he relates to the elemental spirits of the universe. These things are not according to Christ in whom the fullness of deity dwells bodily. Our fullness, or completeness, comes in Him who is above every ruler and every authority in the spiritual realm.

Paul then moves on to indicate that the Christians at Colossae had undergone spiritual circumcision when they were immersed into Jesus, and just as Christ had been raised from death so too that power was now at work in them. God forgave them of all of their trespasses, nailed those trespasses to the cross and erased their record of wrongs. He then made a public example of the rulers and authorities and their lack of power in His triumph over them with His resurrection from the dead. Their ultimate weapon (death) proved to be a blunt instrument that lacked finality and real power.

Week 4

Paul calls upon the Christians at Colossae to resist being drawn into the trap of allowing themselves to be judged by others for matters that were ceremonial, and matters of food and drink. The implication is that these things were only a shadow of the

the things that will come and that the real substance belongs to Jesus Christ. The fear is that in changing focus to these things and allowing the judgment of others to change that focus they are endangered; endangered in their walk with Jesus. Paul makes it clear that such things as self-abasement, the worship of angels, and dwelling upon visions are things that lead to arrogance because they reflect a human way of thinking. This is not the way that God intended for things to be.


Paul goes on to challenge the Colossians to hold fast to the head, which is Christ. In this verse, he draws out some very important theology about the relationship of the church to Christ as the head. It is from this head that so much that is important comes as he uses the analogy of the body. He also expresses the importance of the body (the community of believers) as crucial for the Christian. It is in the context of body that nourishment, maintenance, and growth occur. A part of the body that is separated from the body will quickly die and decay. A person separated from the body, from the community of believers is in great danger. The ultimate source of growth and nourishment for the Christian comes from God. This is an element that seems to be

so often forgotten as churches are more interested in technique, unique approaches, and atmosphere, than they are with promoting clear and powerful connection with God, who is the source of the power provides real and lasting growth.

Paul warns them of the dangers of false teachers who would teach them to appease, or to regulate the elemental spirits of the universe, in a way reminiscent of their former state, but clearly not reflective of their present place in the kingdom of God as Christians. The former regulations regarding tasting, touching, and handling are regulations that perish with use, they are of human origin and though they have the appearance of helping it is only an appearance and not in fact a spiritual reality. They may even make things worse and promote indulgence rather than stop, or hinder it. Paul calls upon the Colossians to remember they are “now,” already, in the kingdom of Christ.

Week 5


Paul calls upon the Colossians to recognize that they are raised with Christ and therefore they are now different and they are to demonstrate those differences in tangible ways by the way that they live and act. Their minds are to be set on things “from



above” and not on those things, which are “earthly”. They now have a new life that is hidden in Christ and the fullness of that new life will be revealed with Christ in glory. This will be reflected in their joy, their gracious nature, their attitudes of love and caring for others.

The transformation is not yet complete, God will not overwrite, or overrule the choice of the individual; and therefore conscious choices must still be made. Paul calls upon the Colossians to deliberately and consciously make those choices and to “put to death” those aspects of their old life that are not going to be a part of their new existence. These things bring the wrath of God and destroy relationship, not only between humans, but also between God and humans.

He continues to remind them of their baptism and what it represented for them in the stripping off of the old self and the clothing of the new self being put in place of the old self. They are being renewed in the image of God, that image is being restored which has been marred and distorted by sin. We are most fully human when we reflect the image of God. All of this is to be done



under the umbrella of love which must overshadow all human activity as it overshadows the activity of God.

The Colossians are called upon to live in harmony, forgiving each other, teaching and admonishing one another, continually moving toward fulfilling their calling to be like Christ. Their life is to be dominated by a consciousness of who they are, and where they are going. This existence is to be one dominated by joy, and thankfulness, recognizing the gift of God.

This life is not one that is to be only partial, or lived out in some places, but not in others. It is to be a part of all relationships, whether it be between husbands and wives, fathers and children, or slaves and masters. Every relationship is to be seen in the reality of the new life and in the new creation. If someone fails to do this they can expect to be punished just as those who do right will be rewarded.

Week 6

This chapter begins with a continuation of instructions for how households should now conduct themselves and here the reference begins with the treatment of slaves by their masters. Paul challenges masters to recognize that they too have a master

to whom they will be called to give an account. He then moves onto describing what should be the things Christians devote themselves to; such as prayer, and specifically prayer for the door to be opened for Paul to be able to declare the word of God effectively and clearly. There is a call for wise conduct, particularly with outsiders and for efforts to use time and opportunities effectively for the progression of the Kingdom. There is also a call for them not to be boring and lacking in grace calling upon them to have a readiness to be able to give an answer to outsiders regarding their faith.

Paul then goes into a greeting and benediction that commends a number of people to them, and continues a theme of encouragement. He specifically commends those who have labored in prayer on behalf of those at Colossae. He reminds some of things they need to do for the Lord while asking for this letter to be read in Laodicea and for them to read the one sent to them.

In this letter as a whole Paul challenges his audience to have a different world-view; one that allows them to see the hand of God moving and transforming that world. Paul calls upon his readers to live in the context of that world, to make decisions that

are based upon this understanding and this perception. They are to love their lives as devoted followers of Jesus and as agents of God's continuing actions that are transforming the old, broken world into the new world of God's Kingdom.

Main Points

Week 1

- Context is crucial to the meaning and must be carefully considered.
- Paul writes in order to counter false teaching either realized or potential.
- Paul speaks as the official representative of Christ Jesus by the will of God.
- Paul emphasizes the reality of their faith and its results.
- Paul emphasizes the truth of the Gospel proclaimed to them by Epaphras.

Week 2

- Christians are called upon to live lives that are "pleasing" to God and are therefore "worthy".

- Christians have been rescued from the tyranny of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Jesus where redemption and forgiveness are the hallmarks.
- Jesus is the physical manifestation of the spiritual reality of God, a mystery revealed in him.
- God was pleased to reconcile the world through Jesus.
- Christians become a part of the body of Christ and continue the mission of Christ, which includes his suffering.

Week 3

- Paul is concerned for the spiritual welfare of those at Colossae.
- He warns them of the dangers of human traditions and philosophies.
- Christ is the container that holds God's mystery.
- He challenges them to live according to what they have received.
- He explains the results of the gospel for them more fully.
- They have been saved through spiritual circumcision and the erasing of their record of trespasses.
- Christ has triumphed over the spiritual forces and

demonstrated his victory publicly.

Week 4

- Do not be trapped by things that are nothing more than a shadow of reality.
- Do not let others disqualify you by resorting to a human way of thinking.
- Hold fast to Christ.
- Do not be tricked by what seems to be piety, but really is not.

Week 5

- Christians have been already raised from the dead with Christ.
- In light of this, life is to be different and we are to actively put to death any remnants of the old life that still lingers.
- Our relationships are to be dominated by the recognition of our new station in the body of Christ.
- We are to always live out our lives in thankfulness to God.

Week 6

- Paul gives a command for masters to treat their slaves fairly.
- Paul gives a command to devote themselves to prayer.

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- Paul gives a command to conduct themselves wisely among outsiders.
 - Paul gives a command to be wise in their use of time.
 - Paul gives a command to speak graciously and with an interesting flair, and not to be boring and uninteresting.
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Questions

1. Why is having the context so important when recounting an event or a conversation?
2. How can you tell today if someone truly understands the Gospel message?
3. How do you evaluate whether you are being told the truth?
4. How is “grace” foundational to being a follower of Jesus?
5. What are some ways that you seek to make “grace” a hallmark of your dealings with others?
6. Why do you think Paul tells the Colossians what he has been praying for them?
7. What does it mean to “please” God?
8. Where is the position of Christ in relation to creation?
9. What traits will characterize the person who is mature in Christ?
10. What does this section of Colossians challenge you to change in your daily routine of life?
11. Why do you think Paul emphasizes the idea of unity here? How would you define unity?
12. What does Jesus teach us about God?
13. What are some ways that we can all promote unity in our daily lives?
14. How might your faith in Jesus remove your fears?

15. Why do you think people seek to observe religious practices in order to be holy?
16. What is it that people hope to gain by the observance of religious festivals and traditions?
17. How do you receive spiritual nourishment?
18. How would you define spiritual growth?
19. How do you actively put to death earthly passions?
20. What are some ways that you can demonstrate compassion for others?
21. What are some ways that you have seen forgiveness change a situation?
22. What are some ways that not forgiving can prolong discord and increase tensions?
23. How would you define the “peace of Christ?”
24. Why do you think God does not seek to abolish slavery in the New Testament?
25. How do you think that “thanksgiving” guards your prayers?
26. Who has been the most influential person in your walk with Christ? Why do you think this is true?
27. What are some risks that you have taken for the cause of Christ?
28. How would you summarize the message of Colossians in one sentence?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that Jesus Christ is above all other authority, and all other powers. It is through Him, and by Him, that all things hold together. There is not need to go to someone else, or through someone else. Jesus is the pinnacle of authority, the pinnacle of salvation and healing. Why do you think we as humans often complicate things that are simple?

Where is God in these words?

God is in the words of Paul here challenging His children to recognize the magnitude of what God has done for the world. Paul challenges His readers to recognize that all that could be done has been already done. The challenge for us is to step into the calling of God and allow Him to transform us and to use us as instruments of His transformation of the world. What are some ways that you seek to be an instrument of God in transforming the world?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

This means that the way I live my life will be changed. I will no longer be afraid of the things that can harm the body in the way I was before coming to know Christ. My goals, my aspirations, my dreams, will become Kingdom goals and dreams. I will seek to be what God has called me to be. The fear that I have will be the “fear of the Lord.” This is a fear that focuses upon what God thinks of me, what God wants of me, what God knows I can become. What are some ways that you sense God working in your life to change who you are?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The Word of God is calling us to be like Jesus. We are called to follow the will of God in all things, in all ways. This means I will seek to treat others with respect, with love, with grace, and with goodwill. It will mean focusing on the needs of others above my own needs and desires. We are called to suffer in order to relieve the suffering of others. We are called to suffer in order to continue to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. What are some ways that you seek to make sacrifices for Christ in your own life?