

Studies in Colossians
Today's Lesson 2:1-23

- I. Introduction, 1:1-14
 - A. Salutation, vv. 1-2
 - B. Prayer of Thanksgiving, vv. 3-8
 - C. Prayer of Petition, vv. 9-14
- [Excursus: The Preeminent Beauty of Christ, vv. 15-23]

- II. The Role of the Apostle 1:24-2:5

- A. The Ministry of the Apostle, vv. 24-29
- B. The Concern of the Apostle, 2:1-5

In the previous section, Paul addressed his ministry for the churches as a whole. Here, he reveals his ministry heart to the two churches: the Colossians and the Laodicean (ten miles to the northwest and by implication (“all”) the church at Hierapolis (4:13) six miles to the north), all three in the Lycus Valley. John speaks to the latter two in Revelation (Rev. 3:14-22). The church at Colossae received a second letter (4:16) that is lost.

- 1. The fact of Paul's labor, v. 1

Paul's immediate context is his Roman imprisonment. Though, his point is that of care evidenced by his prayerful struggles for the churches.

- 2. The reason for Paul's labor, v. 2

What the apostle labored for among those he had not seen points to the substance of his prayer (unity in the bond of love). Additionally, a healthy body of believers is foundationally focused upon the Lord Jesus (“the mystery of God”) from the heart.

- 3. An Excursus: the beauty and centrality of Christ, v. 3

For those who would suggest that focusing on Christ is good, but more is needed, Paul would say it is a lie. To know Christ is to have true knowledge, profound wisdom, and insight. The phrase “wisdom and knowledge” occurs in Rom. 11:33 where God's character is described as it relates to the wonder of redemption. Here, it specifically refers to Christ implying clearly, in Paul's mind, that Jesus Christ was God in human flesh.

- 4. Paul's anxiety for them, vv. 4-5

- a. The threat, v. 4

“I say this” reveals Paul's great struggle for them (v. 1); here is the first mention of false teachers.

Paul does not explain the nature of the threat to the health of the churches at this juncture. However, later he will mention ascetic practices by some (2:16), legalism by others (2:11, 23), and rationalism by yet others. Ascetics viewed piety as the result of the avoidance of contact with pollutants (righteousness by avoidance, forgetting that sin originates from within the heart not the environment); legalists that God's favor can be merited, and rationalists that truth is to be limited to reason (based on observation and repetition).

The essence of the false teaching was that without the insight of self-proclaimed authority figures, you are less than all that God wants you to be (teachings that assert that we have had a good start, but they offer an improved method of maturity). This is why Paul emphasizes throughout the letter our completeness in Christ, the preeminence of Christ.

b. The assurance, v. 5

Though troubled, Paul is aware that the saints are doing well in resistance to the false teachers.

III. The Warnings of the Apostle, 2:6-23

There are two clues as to the structure of this section composed of two paragraphs. Each begins with the word, "therefore," which should tell the reader that an inference or implication is being made by the apostle. Each paragraph contains a warning cast in the negative ("not" and "do not," vv. 7, 16).

A. The way to honor God, vv. 6-7

1. The exhortation, v. 6

The word "received" is intriguing because it is used of word-of-mouth instruction, rather than through documentary sources. It is the origin of what we call "tradition." What the apostles heard had been faithfully communicated to them by others who had also received it in turn. Paul's point seems to be that false teaching will lead away from Christ, though his opponents claim that it will bring one closer to Christ.

Faith is the way to God through Christ, not doing or merely avoiding (people want to merit redemption or, at least, suppose that their Christian life is better than others because of their superior obedience). Faith, taking God at His word concerning the person and claims of Jesus, is the path to redemption and to sanctification.

2. The manner, v. 7

This verse is composed of four participial phrases. The first states an event in the past with continuing relevance. The remaining three are present tense indicating continuous action. Conversion or redemption is a one-time, completed, inadmissible-of-change event; it is a past event. Growth is the second characteristic (we have been rooted deep and we are growing up). The results of growth are progressive maturity and stability as well as thankfulness and appreciation.

These believers have been taught the gospel well and skillfully nourished by good teachers with thankfulness. What a portrait of a healthy community of saints. “Rooted” is an agricultural metaphor; “built up” is a construction image. We have been given a strong foundation (“deeply rooted”) to support significant growth through instruction resulting in abounding joy! Nothing requires adding to the apostle’s teachings when it comes to growth in Christ. This is what it means to “walk in Him (v. 6).”

C. The danger of rampant pagan rationalism, vv. 8-15

While the error that Paul seeks to address continues to be debated by the scholars, the apostle is not casting philosophy, as a discipline, into a negative light, just the misapplication of it (Paul frequently uses reasoning to make his points). Philosophy is a form of natural revelation; it emphasizes the function of reason in knowing. Unfortunately, the modern mind has elevated reason from a *method* of knowing to reason as the *source and origin* of knowing (truth is the sum of what is observable and repeatable, the seen without regard to the unseen). When reason usurps Scripture, error ensues. As a source of religious truth, Tertullian was correct when he wrote in the third century, “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the academy with the church?”

1. The warning against pagan rationalism., v. 8

a. The declaration, v. 8a

“Philosophy” and “empty deception” are parallel descriptions of the cultural tendency to elevate the accomplishments of natural reason and denigrate Christian truth-claims (a single article governing two nouns connected by “and”).

b. The manner, v. 8b

“Traditions of men” and “elementary principles of the world” suggest the natural origin of rational ideas. It is how the world thinks! The first phrase describes the conclusions men come to (it is of human origin) while the second the sources they used (human ingenuity).

c. The contrast, v. 8c

The things originating from natural sources stand in contrast to what has been revealed supernaturally through Christ by the Spirit and delivered to us in written form.

2. The plea, vv. 9-15

Paul’s answer to the captivating peril of false, winsome teachers is to focus on the truth, the person of Christ and His redemption! To be

preserved from error is to become a student of the truth; in knowing the beauty of truth you will be able to discern the ugliness of error.

a. That divine truth is in Christ, v. 9

The first reason we should be guided by Christ, not the mere wisdom of human intellect, is that Christ is one-of-a-kind. In Christ alone is the embodiment of divine wisdom. The present tense of the verb, “dwells,” explicitly indicates that Jesus was not a mere man endowed with wisdom for a time; He is forever God.

b. Our life is in Christ, vv. 10-12

1) The completeness, v. 10

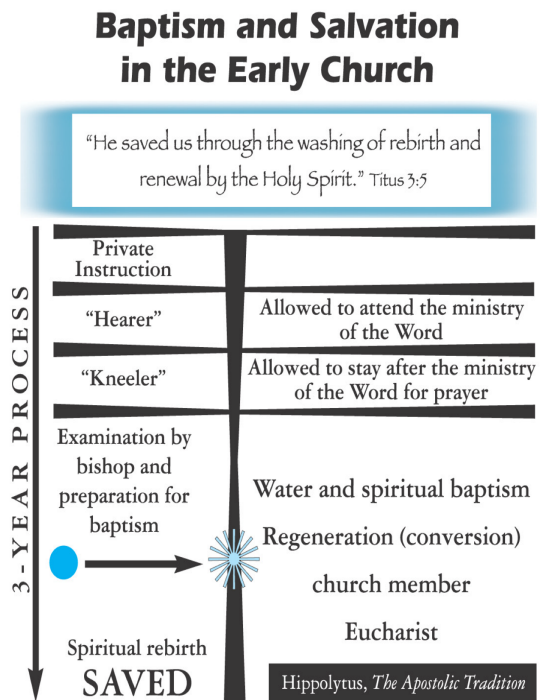
The word “fullness” in v. 9 is repeated here. Just as God fully resides in Christ, we reside in Christ. Nothing is lacking in our salvation from the divine viewpoint. To sustain the point, Paul adds that Christ is supreme over all other authorities.

2) The cleansing, v. 11

Paul employs a Jewish term suggestive that the church was struggling to sort out its Jewish heritage. To many first century Jews, physical circumcision was the means to entering into the divine covenant relationship (it was an identity marker). The cutting of the flesh signified our separation from corruption. This has been accomplished by Christ, not Jewish ritualism. Through Christ, we have been spiritually circumcised (of the heart), redeemed, cleansed, separated from evil.

3) The new life, v. 12

Paul connects baptism with death and death with the inception of new life; that is, baptism signifies the end of one type of life through the medium of washing that brings with it a new beginning of life. Clearly, Paul is describing metaphorically our regeneration. Baptism denotes a burial and resurrection to life. In the early church faith, regeneration, and baptism was seen frequently as occurring at the same instance (an exception being the Ethiopian eunuch). The term for “working (power, enablement)” is only used in the NT for divine activity. Salvation faith is a gift from God.



c. Our redemption is in Christ, vv. 13-15

1) Life through forgiveness, v. 13

The plight of all mankind is a hopeless one because, though living, they are apart from the life of God and wayward (transgressions, “missing the mark”) that is caused by our twisted natures (“uncircumcision” is a metaphor of the presence of sin in us). God brought life because of Christ to us, meaning forgiveness, the cancellation of the debt of our sins.

2) Life through payment, v. 14

This verse explains how the forgiveness of God came to us. The “certificate of debt,” legal evidence of obligation in written form, of the charges against us have been erased or wiped away (the verb appeared first in the verse placing emphasis on it). “Nailed to the cross” is quite the metaphor. Christ was literally nailed to the cross, the death reserved for us; the cruelest of punitive instruments known to the Romans. He endured.

3) Life through “another’s” triumph, v. 15

The irony of it all is that where one would expect defeat, there was victory. “Rulers and authorities” may refer to political structures, satanic spiritual forces, or both. Christ’s death brought defeat to evil and triumph over it evidenced by the resurrection. Vaughan (202) has said it well, “The picture, quite familiar in the Roman world, is that of a triumphant general leading a parade of victory. To the casual observer the cross appears to be only an instrument of death, the symbol of Christ’s defeat; Paul represents it as Christ’s chariot of victory.” William Williams hymn, *In Eden*, is apropos.

*Faith, see the place, see the tree
Where heaven’s prince instead of me,
Was nailed to bear my shame.
Bruised was the dragon by the Son,
Though two has wounds, there conquered one-
And Jesus was His name,
And Jesus was His name.*

D. The danger of rampant religious rigorism, vv. 16-23

Legalism is not the presence of rules and regulations requiring adherence; it is an attitude concerning obedience that is the issue. When people believe that unwarranted or unrequired rules makes one a better or superior Christian, that is legalism. Legalism is the belief that an action brings one into the favor of God, creating a special status in so doing; it is the belief that God’s favor can be earned through our obedience. It is putting something in the place of Christ who is everything!

The phrase, “let no one...” occurs in vv. 18, 20 alerting the reader to the

apostle's two main warnings. Both warnings have to do with corruption of Christian teaching among the churches. The two are interconnected.

1. The problem with legalism, vv. 16-17

a. Stated, v. 16

The stipulations (5) that Paul lists have to do with the Mosaic Code suggesting that the early church grappled to understand the relationship of Judaism to Christianity. False teachers came among the Christian churches arguing that a true Christian was a follower of Moses.

b. Reasoned, v. 17

The Judaism of the first century was not biblical Judaism; it was a twisted, man-made perversion of it (Matt. 5). The Law of Moses functioned to point beyond itself to a profound reality; it served to prepare one for the coming of Christ. To read Moses correctly is to understand that he pointed to Christ (John 1:17, Heb. 9:10).

2. The problem with ascetic, hyper-spirituality, vv. 18-19

a. Stated, v. 18a

The second error that Paul counteracts is the notion that specific religious practices can bring no one an elevated spiritual state.

b. Described, vv. 18b-19

Five phrases characterize the false teaching:

- 1) "delights in humility" or the spirituality of self-denial, moral rigorism, self-deprivation as a religious ideal.
- 2) "worship of angels" as divine mediators, higher spirits that can bring us into heaven.
- 3) visions
- 4) self-deception, false confidence, pride
- 5) separated from allegiance to Christ, the source of true spiritual growth

3. The Conclusion, vv. 20-23

a. Stated, vv. 20a

The "if" does not suggest that Paul's audience is in danger of losing what they have gained; the "if" is a first-class condition and can be translated as a fact (since or "if you have... *and you have*"). "Having been buried with Him in baptism..." (v. 12) indicates that a death has occurred. These believers have "died" and since that is true...

"From elemental principles [teachings]" seems to be the false thoughts of human imaginings that people think. It is natural religion; it is rooted in the thought that we must do something to bring God's favor to us. It is a failure to understand that true religion is the story of God bringing His favor to us through Christ's work for us, His peace through the violence of His cross.

b. Reasoned, vv. 20b-23

1) The incongruity of it, vv. 20b-21

To order our lives by what we have left behind is destructive and

illogical. If we have seen the foolishness of seeking to please God apart from what Christ has earned for us, it is crazy to fall back into what we know is wrong. One translation captures the language rather clearly (NLT), “You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world...” In this construction, “if” indicates that something is assumed true for the sake of an argument (If this is true, then that is true).

Though some writers see the “if” as expressive of a contingency, that a believer can believe and later not believe, losing what they had gained as a result, the context does not support this conclusion. 1) Paul is writing to a corporate unity in each locale, the church, not individuals (“you” is in the plural). 2) The topic is not the loss of salvation; it is the damage that comes through retrogression to ideas we know to be wrong. 3) “If” introduces a dependent clause with the verb in present indicative tense meaning that it is stating a fact (if the verb is in the past tense, it indicates something that is not true [second class condition]; if the verb is in the subjective mood, it is probable [third class condition]). Hence, what we have here is a rhetorical “if;” it is a polite command. Something like, “If you play with fire, you will get burned;” it is a warning couched in a mild command.

2) The temporality of it, v. 22

Such attempt to earn the favor of the infinite God and thereby neglect the great truth that our salvation is a purchased gift from God through the cross of our atoning Savior, will come to nothing. It is not eternal truth; it is a deceptive delusion.

3) The emptiness of it, v. 23

Salvation through what we can do to seemingly merit God’s love, even if abstinence and self-denial are theoretically valuable, is fruitless regarding our pleasing God. Christ has rendered us pleasing. Rigorism or legalism is not the way to “walk in Him (v. 6).”

Thoughts

1. Our passage contains a wonderful description of the characteristics of a growing Christian. First, such people are “firmly rooted” in Christ as a tree in the soil (here the soil of redemption). Second, they are constantly being nourished and thus built up. Third, they are increasingly becoming more stable in the faith. Fourth, they are thankful. Of the four descriptions the tense of the verb indicates that it is something that is a past event (conversion); the three remaining verbs are present tense indicating, not so much a completed act in the past but ongoing actions in the present. Do these descriptors characterize you? The first cannot be increased, but the three are subject to increase and maturity. Are you growing? Are there areas that need special attention because you are lagging in them?

2. The misuse or misappropriation of what God has given for us that leads to problems. The ability to think and reason is a gift from God, important to the management of life. However, the ability to reason is neither the extent of our knowledge nor the source of all that can be known. We have been given a mind to guard our ways and a heart to guard our souls. Pascal said it long ago, "The heart has ways of knowing the mind knows not of." I would say that God has revealed things He wants us to know that reason cannot discover though the truth of what God reveals to us through Christ and the apostles is reasonable. To limit knowledge to what reason can grasp is to learn the structure of things, but never the source of them. Ultimate reasons, final insights, and penultimate meanings cannot be discovered by searching the libraries of the secular academies or the most intricate methods of accessing knowledge; it is found in the Holy Scriptures, Christ, and the believing heart. Reason helps us understand how; revelation reveals the whom who caused the how discerned by reason.
3. Christianity is unique among the numerous belief systems. Not so because it claims truths undiscoverable by reason, but in the assertion that the life it promises comes to us as a purchased gift that satisfies all the demands for our acceptance. Legalism, even Christian legalism, says the opposite. It says we must do something; we must be something, we must know something that others cannot grasp. Legalism says I can earn God's favor; the Bible says that Christ has purchased God's favor. Legalism says I can add to what Christ has done, improving my status, Christianity says that Christ has done all we need, that we are complete in Christ no matter how broken we might be in life. Are you trying to earn God's favor? Do you realize that Christ is sufficient for all your deficiencies? Have you learned to rest in Christ's accomplishments? Do you know that seeking to add to His accomplishments is a declaration of His insufficiency?
4. The gospel message, the good news, is that salvation cannot be earned, increased, or decreased. It is not a quality that can be measured; it is a state of being. The German King Maxmillian I left instructions upon his death in 1519 that his body was to be emaciated, limbs broken, and teeth crushed so that when he appeared before God, He would have pity for him and allow him into heaven. Pity does not merit the life of God; death is required. Not our death, but the death of God's gift. Tragically, Maxmillian never realized that we cannot move God to mercy without infinite merit, which only His Son possesses. Have you given up trying to earn life? Do you realize that someone else has done that for you? Have you accepted God's divine gift of His Son for you?
5. There are some phrases in our passage that are worthy of delightful meditation. Paul's phrases are particularly descriptive at times creating marvelous word pictures. The "certificate of debt" has been removed from us, having been "nailed to the cross (v. 14)." What a picture of our redemption by Christ, the manner of it, and the finality of it. What great assurance we have of our redemption! Christ is sufficient for all our needs. Is the hurt caused by your sin greater than the compassion of Christ for you? When will you stop taking refuge in past negative memories and trust that Christ is greater than all our sin?