

Lessons on Colossians

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Cover: Codex Harleianus 5557 (shows opening of Colossians). Headpiece with geometric and foliate decoration and decorated initial 'P'. Origin: Eastern Mediterranean. Source: British Library. Public Domain.

Dedication

To our friends from the Becoming Closer class, for their constant encouragement and support.

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Introduction

The City

We need to take a look at a map first.



It's not apparent at first, but the city of Colosse is located on the trade route between the eastern part of the Roman Empire and the Western part. As such, it is a meeting point for ideas from the eastern and western worlds. The church in that city was probably founded by Epaphras. The reason we think so is that Paul addresses his letter to the people there, but doesn't reference anyone personally. It is, however, near several other churches where Paul is known to have spoken. The letter itself was written approximately A.D. 63. This would be about two years before Paul's death. We hear nothing about Colossae after this; there is no other correspondence with the church in that city. According to Eusebius the reason for this is that an earthquake destroyed the city approximately A.D. 70.

The Circumstances

At the time of this writing, Paul is in prison. Apparently, Epaphras has come to him to encourage him. In the process he tells him about his home church. We suspect that Epaphras asked Paul to write this letter to the church at Colossae for their encouragement. It has been suggested that the reason for this is that a fraudulent letter, purporting to be from Paul, was circulating in the area. Paul, in this letter, lays out the nature of Christ and what we should do about it — which therefore makes letter is very useful to us today.

The Competition

As we said, this city is a meeting place of ideas. There were two particular Jewish ideas going around the city at the time.

- ✚ There was a very strange hybrid of Zoroastrianism and Judaism. Zoroastrianism, for those of you not familiar, holds that there are two equal and opposite spiritual forces. One of these is good; one of these is evil. Star Wars fans will remember the dark side of the force, for example. It's one of those ideas that pops up every now and then. How you mix this with Judaism I do not know, but they did.
- ✚ Another group prominent in the area is familiar to you: the Essenes. These are the people whose brothers in Palestine wrote out what are now called the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were largely an ascetic group.

At the same time, the beginnings of the Gnostic heresy are arising. One version, the Docetic, held that Jesus did not have a real, physical body. His body was just an appearance; the word they used for this was "icon." It is very much parallel to the icon in use for Microsoft Windows system. The other version, the Cerinthian, separated Christ from Jesus. Christ was some sort of spiritual being who came to Jesus at his baptism and left as he was dying on the cross. Both of these stem from the Greek philosophical position that the flesh is inherently evil.

In addition to these versions, we had several other religions running around the place. There was a very secretive cult named Mithraism, which is very typical of what is called a mystery religion. Most of its tenets are unknown to us today; its major appeal was that if you joined, you were in on the secret. There was also a religion based on a fertility goddess, Cybele. These two particular religions were strong in the area around Colossae. Interestingly, the one based on Cybele has recently been revived — in the form of a cult that holds certain sexual practices known as female domination as being necessary to the conduct of marriage. Apparently, since the priests of Cybele castrated themselves to become such, they felt this particular form of ancient religion was most suitable for their purposes. Further investigation into these two religions I leave to the reader — with caution.

Paul's Prayer

Colossians 1:1-8 NASB Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, (2) To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ *who are* at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. (3) We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, (4) since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; (5) because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel (6) which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as *it has been doing* in you also since the day you heard *of it* and understood the grace of God in truth; (7) just as you learned *it* from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, (8) and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

There is a puzzle in the opening remarks of this letter. Do you see the phrase, "Saints and faithful brethren?" Why does Paul make this distinction? The best answer I've been able to determine is this: it is a poetic repetition. The word "Saints" denotes our relationship with God; the phrase "faithful brethren" denotes our relationship with each other.

We Give Thanks

Paul often begins his prayers with thanksgiving — a practice which has its merits. There are three things for which he is thankful:

- ✚ First, for their faith in Christ Jesus. It is important to remember that these people have never met Jesus in the flesh, and apparently have never even talked to an apostle in the flesh. In that sense, they are much closer to us than the people in Ephesus, to whom Paul preached. When you consider the other religious options around, you can see that these people resemble us in a great number of ways.
- ✚ Second, for their love for the saints. This should not be misinterpreted in the Catholic sense, as that type of Saint has yet to arise. Rather, it means that they perform the ordinary acts of Christian hospitality and charity towards one another. This, we are told, is how the world will know that we are Christians: by our love.
- ✚ Finally, for their hope. This seems a little vague to us, but in the early church this had only one real meaning. That meaning was the hope of the resurrection of the dead at the return of Christ. This is something that has disappeared from the preaching in the author's home church lately. We may assume, however, that God Almighty has not changed his mind on the subject.

The Gospel

Paul incidentally describes the gospel in his prayer. He begins by referring to it as the “word of truth.” This is something which is quite important to the Colossians, considering the vast mix of religions that are around them. They need the reassurance that they have selected the right one, that they are selected the one that is true. Paul gives them two pieces of evidence for this:

- ✚ The first is the fruit that the gospel is bearing within the Colossians themselves. The argument is simple: take a look at what's happening in your own life, since you accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you see the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life, then you know that this is something you didn't do yourself — and that what you believe is in fact the real truth. In short, look at the evidence.
- ✚ The second is the gospel bearing fruit and increasing in the world around them. What does this mean? It means that the other people in Colossae are examining this message of the gospel and finding it superior to the mystery religions and strange combinations of ideas. This is not surprising; for the most part those other religions are man-made. Christianity explicitly invites the nonbeliever to examine the roots and foundations of the faith. Reason is not the enemy of faith, but the ally.

Epaphras

Paul now puts in a word for the local boy. He wants them to be assured that what they heard from Epaphras is the same thing they would've heard from Paul. Paul's reputation is, of course much greater; therefore it is appropriate for him to certify the preacher they have locally. He makes three points:

- ✚ Epaphras is Paul's beloved fellow bondservant. Break that down with me. He is “beloved” — not just somebody that's tolerated. Paul knows the man personally and loves him. He is also Paul's “fellow bondservant.” In other words, he's doing the same work as Paul — and with the same attitude. That attitude is that he is not someone high and mighty in the church (the one apostle, if anyone, who could make that claim) but rather a servant of Christ to the point of being a slave.

- ✦ Epaphras is faithful on behalf of Paul and those who are carrying the gospel. In other words, Epaphras is not inventing some extra things or leaving things out, but rather he is preaching the entire truth to the people of Colossae.
- ✦ Just in case you folks thought you could relax now, and rest upon your reputation, Paul now reminds him that Epaphras bragged on them. They now have a reputation to live up to.

For This Reason

Colossians 1:9-14 NASB For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, (10) so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; (11) strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously (12) giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. (13) For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, (14) in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

For this reason? What is this reason for which Paul prays for the Colossians? Let me summarize it in the three words used before: faith, hope and love. These three things, Paul assured the Corinthians, are the things that abide. They also move Paul to pray for those he has never met. We may now examine his prayers.

Prayer: Filled with Knowledge

The word used for knowledge here is *epignosis* — meaning a full and complete knowledge. There are three things he wants them to have knowledge of:

- ✦ The first is God’s will. As he is writing to a large group, we may assume that this implies the will of God which should be known by each and every Christian.
- ✦ The second is for spiritual wisdom. It is a curious phrasing in the Greek, and sounds strange to modern ears. We are not much acquainted with wisdom as a desirable thing, and spiritual wisdom seems to be almost a contradiction in terms. Our emphasis today on the idea that things spiritual are things emotional is the cause of this. They would’ve seen no contradiction between wisdom (an intellectual activity) and things spiritual, which did not to them imply purely emotional.
- ✦ The third is for understanding. The Greek word for this means something like to mentally put it all together. The concept here is one of understanding the big picture as well as the tiny details.

Prayer: Walk

Of course, prayer does you no good unless you attempt to put it into practice. You have to “walk the talk,” as the old phrase goes. Interestingly, Paul starts out which is something almost self defining. He tells you to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. It’s as if he is saying that you should know how to do this; it should be obvious. You’re there to please him, and not just partially. So what is it that God is looking for?

- ✦ The first thing is that you are bearing fruit. If you have the Holy Spirit in your life, your life should be different than it was before. All those fruits of the spirit should be showing up in your life.
- ✦ Next, you should have increasing knowledge of the faith. This is the reason that you are encouraged to read the Bible daily. Those who have made a practice of this over many years will understand the phenomenon. You come across a passage that you’ve read ten or twenty times before and suddenly

discover some new meaning. You just weren't ready for it last year, but now is the time. If this doesn't happen to you, perhaps you should be examined your reading program. Or start one.

✚ Finally, your faith should be strengthened as you go. Paul gives us two descriptions of this strengthening faith.

✚ First, he talks about attaining all steadfastness and patience. Those who believe that faith is an emotional experience will have some difficulty with this. They would view it differently. They would view that this is the normal result of increasing faith. Faith is not something that floats up and down with the minute, but is calm and steady.

✚ Next, he says that this is something that happens joyously. Paul was never an advocate of sour persimmon faith. The life of faith is the life of triumph; the life of triumph is the life of joy.

Prayer: Enabled

There is a bit of a problem in verse twelve. It appears that we are to give thanks to God the father now that we are qualified to be saints. In the original language, it is clear that this is not something that we did — but rather something that God did for us. That is something for which we should give thanks.

It seems like Paul has just slipped this into the stream of thought, so we might want to consider this just a bit more carefully. The picture he's drawing for you here is that before we met Christ we were in the domain of darkness. It might've been one of those mystery religions, or some strange combination of Judaism and who knows what else. But the truth is we were stumbling around in the darkness, trying to figure out what all those things were that we were bumping into. One of the characteristics of many other religions is the explanation that there is no explanation. Things just happen. You're supposed to walk around in the dark. As a result, it's easy to get let down a path which leads to sin and destruction — because you have no light to tell you where the path is going.

But that's not us. We have been transferred — military veterans will think of this is a permanent change of station — to the kingdom of Christ. Things were vague before; now they are clear. Methods seem to be strange formulas and incantations; now we talk to God. The lights are on; we know where were going. Not only that; we have been redeemed by the forgiveness of sins. We have been set right with God; indeed, let us give thanks.

Icon - Colossians 1:15-29

Image

Colossians 1:15-18 NASB (15) He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (16) For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. (17) He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (18) He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

The Icon

It is fairly easy to understand that God, the creator, must be in any sense invisible. The universe is composed of all forms of matter and energy; to the best of our knowledge we cannot see anything, in any sense physical, unless it is composed of either matter or energy or both. It is intuitively obvious that whoever or whatever created the universe cannot be made of the same stuff as the universe — otherwise; the creator would be part of the created universe. That's nonsense. Therefore God cannot be seen — and has good reason in the Ten Commandments to prohibit the creation of a graven image to be worshiped. No statue or pottery could possibly picture the creator of the universe.

We are told that it is possible to see God, however. Christ tells us this in the Beatitudes when he says that blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Apparently the proper instrument for seeing the spiritual God is the spiritual human being. This is all well and good, but it leaves most of us rather flat. We don't learn too well from being pure in heart and seeing God. The reason for that is relatively simple: how do you get to be pure in heart if you can't see a good example of it?

If we are to be imitators of God, we have to have something to imitate. God has provided that in the person of Jesus, the Christ. Paul tells us here that he is the "icon" of God — that is the original word in the Greek. It's tempting to equate this to a computer icon, and there are some similarities. But the truth is much deeper and more complex. The doctrine of the church has always been that Jesus of Nazareth was, is, always has been, always will be God in the flesh. To see him is to see God. I am not quite sure how this is done — but we celebrate it every Christmas. So if you want to know what God looks like in human form, you look at Jesus of Nazareth. The fundamental moral dictate of Christianity has always been the imitation of Christ, God in the flesh. But that is hardly the end of the story.

Role in Creation

We are told here that Christ is the firstborn of all creation. The word itself, *prototokos*, is perhaps better translated as "first fruits." You can see the connection in that we say that a tree bears fruit as a woman bears a child — we have the same parallel in English. This would've resonated with the Jewish members of the church, as they would've seen firstfruits as something dedicated to God. The firstborn would also resonate with them, because in Jewish law the firstborn gets twice the inheritance of all the others and becomes the patriarch of the clan when his father dies. Moreover, to call someone firstborn implies that there are others; and we shall see that the orthodox doctrine is that Christ is first in the resurrection, but we shall follow.

What is actually astounding is that this same Jesus is said to be the agent of creation. He is, in the philosophical sense, the immediate cause of creation itself; the guy who did the work. Note, please, that this includes not only the physical universe (matter and energy) but also the spiritual aspects of the universe. He gives life to all things spiritual — Angels, fallen Angels, cherubim, Seraphim and human beings. The reason this is astounding is that we find them within the universe which he created. This is become a movie theme as of late; the idea is that the inventor of the game somehow transports himself into the game. In fact, our society's ignorance is so profound that some of the people who are fond of such movies have accused the Christians of stealing the plot. It goes further than that; not only is he the immediate cause of the universe he is also the teleological cause — he is the reason the universe was created in the first place. Let that sink in for a moment.

He is said here to be “before all things.” It's a little difficult to speak of someone being in existence before time, because the word “before” implies the existence of time as a sequence. But it's probably the best way that Paul could put it; time did not exist when Christ did. The physics of this must be very interesting. But it does bring to our minds the fact that the word “eternal” does not mean the same thing as “endless.” It is the compound of two words in Greek which mean “not affected by time.” We remember that one of the characteristics of God as revealed in the Old Testament is that he is unchanging — that is to say, unaffected by time. That same characteristic is shared by Christ.

We're not done with the physics yet. “In him all things hold together.” He is the glue that keeps the universe running. The reason gravity works this morning the same way it did yesterday morning is that he wills it to be so. There is nothing in the laws of physics that says that gravity cannot change tomorrow morning at 9:32 a.m. — yet physicists continue to plan on gravity being exactly the same. It comes back to his unchanging nature — the universe, his artistic creation, reflects the artist. The artist is eternal; the laws of his universe are unchanging.

Head of the Church

What we have said so far is quite a mouthful; Paul is not done. In his description of Christ he has saved the most important thing for last. You might well ask what could possibly be more important than the universe. His answer would be — the church. The church is the climax of his list. Why? It's because the church is the body of Christ, designed to live forever — to be eternal, like God. The universe will end. The church will not.

Therefore, in that most important spiritual organism Christ has the supremacy as well. The church is his body; he is the head of that body. This is a point about which much dispute has been raised, particularly between Protestants and Catholics. Protestants, who take the Scriptures as their sole guide, see Christ is the head of the church. Catholics, who add to the Scripture, see the Pope as head of the church.

You don't get to be the head of the church — at least in the Protestant sense — without reason. Christ is the firstborn from the dead. It's the same word again; he is the first person to be raised from the dead into the new body which we shall all someday have.¹ He is first by right of accomplishment.

The purpose in mentioning this is so that you will know that Christ is preeminent in all things righteous and good. This is why the imitation of Christ is the first principle of Christian conduct — for he is always worthy of our imitation.

Reconciliation

Colossians 1:19-23 NASB (19) For it was the *Father's* good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, (20) and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, *I say*, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (21) And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, *engaged* in evil deeds, (22) yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach-- (23) if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

Reconciliation at the Cross

"It was the father's good pleasure" — an elegant expression this is, meaning that it was God's will. This is not something that happened unintentionally; the Cross was planned before hand, not invented on the spur of the moment. Its purpose was quite simple: to reconcile all things to himself. This means that not only did he reconcile human beings, but all of creation to himself. The curse laid upon the land at the sin of Adam is now lifted at the cross of Christ. So it is that we are reconciled with God the Father.

The word used for reconcile in this passage could be better translated, perhaps, as "reconcile fully." This is not a partial reconciliation but a complete one. We use the word in two senses, both of which are valid in this context:

- ✚ The first is in the familiar emotional context of reconciliation — usually accompanied by an outpouring of forgiveness. We say that two people who have been arguing are reconciled by forgiving each other. This reconciliation is an extension of that; it is God forgiving us. In this reconciliation he erases our sins.
- ✚ The second is perhaps less familiar to us, but what have been familiar to the Jew of the time. The law was quite specific about what sin was; you can't just generally forgive people of things, you have to forgive them of specific sins. The books must balance, the accounting must be right. We sometimes forget that reconciliation is also an accounting term — and the people of this time would've understood that. It would mean to them that every specific sin they had ever committed was forgiven, by name and in detail.

If you want to convince someone that you've accomplished something which does not necessarily show immediate results, you at least must show them the mechanism by which you did it. If

¹ The reader should note that the church which the author attends has moved to the "emerging church" theology — which now denies the physical resurrection of the dead. The author disagrees. However, that physical resurrection is not the doctrine taught from the pulpit or endorsed by the eldership. Local readers in particular should know this and be aware of the difference.

the doctor says you will recover from the infection, you want to see the bottle of antibiotics. You want to see the mechanism by which the healing is done before you will have faith in it. The mechanism by which the healing of your sins is accomplished is the blood of Christ, shed at the Cross. Now you know how it works.

Note, please, that this reconciliation is for “all things” — and he specifically says that this applies to things on earth and things in heaven. You might wonder why he would have to include heaven. But consider it this way: suppose your sins were committed against someone who is now dead and gone. By what mechanism could you possibly seek forgiveness? The answer is found in the blood of Christ, the blood of the innocent Lamb of God. The person who is dead cannot be forgiven without the blood of Christ anymore than you can be. He thus becomes the intermediary between those we have sinned against two are now gone from us and ourselves.

Alienated

Stop me if this sounds too familiar. One can be an alien in a number of different ways. We use the word for a lot of things; for example, little green men from outer space are referred to as aliens. Why is this? Because they don't belong on this planet (assuming they exist.) We also speak of people who come from another country as being aliens, a particularly if they are not on the path to become citizens. You go from being an alien to our resident to a citizen in our country. But until you become a citizen you are excluded from certain parts of our life, at least in theory. For example, you're not allowed to vote.² Have you ever considered what alienates you from God? Paul tells us right here:

- ✚ The first thing is a hostile mind. Think about some of the people you know who think that Christianity is ridiculous. They are not bemused by your beliefs; they ridicule them and actively attack them. If you were a Buddhist, they would not. Nor would they attack you if you were a Moslem. Did you ever wonder why?
- ✚ A hostile mind to God inevitably leads to evil deeds. These things keep you separate from God because you like to hang on to them — and they like to hang on to you. You know how it works; once you've done something evil, you have to justify it to yourself. Without God's forgiveness, it's the best option you have.

But things are changed — you've become a child of Christ. Now, Paul tells us, you are fit to stand before the throne of Almighty God. Let's take that in a simple example. Suppose, somehow, that you are invited to appear before the Queen of England to be knighted for your services in some sense or another — let's say you are a rock star. How would you dress for the occasion? I'm not sure what the right protocol is; you might have to buy a tuxedo. But whatever you wear, it would be fit for the occasion; you wouldn't wear your sweat suit and running shoes. It would be very embarrassing if you just didn't have the clothes at all. How much more, then, is a great thing to know that you are fit to be presented to the Lord of the universe! What could possibly change to make you so fit to see the God of the universe?

² In the state in which your author lives it is a common fact that aliens frequently register to vote, which is technically illegal. This does not alter the argument of how things should be.

- ✦ First, you are now holy. That doesn't make you a plaster saint; it means that you been set apart for God. He's reached down into the common run of humanity and pulled you out and set you aside for his own purposes. You are one of his; you are fit to appear before Him.
- ✦ You are also blameless. The word actually means "without blemish." I'm not sure we could say this means "without scars." But it does mean that God is cleaning up our act.
- ✦ Finally, you are "beyond reproach." What this really means, in the original, is that you are not accused of anything. The reason for this is quite simple; God has told your accuser (Satan) to shut up about you.

If You Continue

All of this blessing and benefit is conditional, as you will notice. It's not something you can acquire once, put in the photo album, and then go back to living the way you used to. In fact, Paul uses four different ways to say the same thing: you have to continue in the faith.

This makes simple sense. Have you ever had the doctor tell you that you have to take all the pills in the bottle? It's a common practice of antibiotics that they tell you to finish the prescription, take all the pills, and don't let the infection come back. The same thing is true with faith; you're going to have to continue in the faith for the rest of your life if it's going to be effective.

How do you do this? He tells you here simply that you should not move away from the hope of the gospel. We need to understand what that is. The word "gospel" in the original means "good news" — and the good news in question is that of the hope of the resurrection of the dead. Look at it this way: why should you behave? If the answer is because there may be some vague hereafter, that's not very much motivation. But if the answer is that those of us who follow Christ faithfully will rise from the dead in physical form, then we have a lot more motivation. God knows we need it.

Rejoice in Suffering

Colossians 1:24-29 NASB (24) Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. **(25)** Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching of the word of God*, **(26)** *that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, **(27)** to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. **(28)** We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. **(29)** For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

Do My Share

Paul uses an unusual phrase here: "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." Have you ever considered that the suffering of Christ was not sufficient? It so appears to be. That, then, would imply that there is some suffering on our part which is necessary; we have our share. That's something that's not usually mentioned to new Christians, who are often given the impression that life is going to be a bowl of cherries once they become a Christian. Those with more experience at it have not noticed this particular phenomenon.

Indeed, part of Christianity is stewardship — the idea that God is going to give you a task to perform, a responsibility to carry out. Anyone familiar with this concept knows that stewardship implies a certain amount of suffering. You think not? Have you ever been a father or mother? It is probably the most responsible form of stewardship that most of us will ever get. We often feel a lot of joy in being mom or dad (or grandma or grandpa), but there's a certain amount of pain that goes with it to. If you're going to be a parent, you're going to suffer. Surprisingly, this doesn't seem to deter most people from becoming parents. It's just possible that there is some benefit to this.

Of course, suffering becomes much more bearable when it has a purpose. Those who go to the gym regularly and work out are familiar with the phrase, "no pain, no gain." You know that you have to sweat and suffer if you're going to get your body to do what you want it to do. Suffering with a purpose is better. And what is the purpose that Paul gives us here? That we can fully carry out the word of God — in our personal lives, as evangelists to those we meet and as examples to those who look up to us.

Mystery

Paul tells us here that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a mystery hidden up until his time. We need to remember that the modern mystery novel is a relatively recent invention, and Paul's use of the word mystery is different than the way we would use it today. The distinction is important:

- ✚ We use the word mystery to describe a certain type of problem which is solved in the terms in which it is presented. The solution is neat and tidy, but most of all it is a deductive solution. You figure something out. You follow the clues and determine who did it. It is an analytic solution.
- ✚ Paul's use of the word mystery is to signify something which has been concealed — and which may be well beyond our capability of "figuring out." It's something that's hidden. There may be clues, but the solution is not analytic or deductive. The solution is creative; God makes something new.

What is that new thing? Simply this: the Gentiles will share in the kingdom of God. Think how radical that must've been to the early Jewish Christians! For all their lives they've been told that the Jews are the chosen people of God, and the Gentiles are nothing but fodder for the fires of hell. If you're not Jewish, you can't go to heaven, God will not bless you, and you are not one of the exclusive, chosen people. More to the point, there's nothing you can do about it. That same stage of God's revelation did not make clear — though there were some hints — that the resurrection of the body was something that would actually happen. That is what Paul calls here "the hope of glory." The word glory has faded from the English language lately, but sometimes there's nothing else that can be used to describe such a thing. The resurrection of the dead is indeed the hope of glory.

For This Purpose

We said earlier that suffering is much easier when there is a purpose to it. What then is the purpose of the Christian life, as Paul sees it?

- ✚ First, it is to proclaim Christ. The great commission is quite clear: we are to reproduce ourselves. We are to make disciples. This can't be done without proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, the Son of the living God.
- ✚ We are to do this with "all wisdom." In other words, we are to give it our best effort, using every technique and bit of knowledge and sagacity that we possess. We are to behave as if everything depended upon us.

✚ But at the same time we are to realize that everything depends on him. We are to do this in his power, not in our own.

As Paul put it elsewhere:

Philippians 2:12-13 NASB (12) So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; **(13)** for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.

Fullness of Christ - Colossians 2:1-12

How Great a Struggle

Colossians 2:1-3 NASB For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, (2) that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*, (3) in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Praying for “Them”

Perhaps this is a problem you have never thought about. Christians are often asked to pray for a church in a distant location, frequently one led by missionaries sponsored by their own home church. As long as this is done as part of the worship service, somebody else has to think up the prayer. But when you're asked to put it on your prayer list, you've got to do the thinking. So, how do you pray for a church that's “over there?”

The answer often depends on just how much you know about that church over there. There are certain degrees of connection:

- ✚ You might just know someone from that church. For example, a young lady from our congregation joined the work in Haiti that dealt with disabled children. We knew her parents. As a result, we have a lot of information about what was going on and were able to pray specifically.
- ✚ More commonly you know something about the church in question. You might know, for example, what tribal groups they are evangelizing; you might know the area in which they work. It gives you some clue as to what ask for in genuine concern.
- ✚ Sometimes you just know that they are “out there.”

Paul has the advantage of knowing someone from this congregation — Epaphras. It makes his connection with them more personal. It is very revealing that he describes his prayer as a “great struggle.” Therein lies the secret of praying for another congregation. It's not just a laundry list of things you'd like God to do for them; it's joining in spiritual warfare with them so that they might be upheld in the face of Satan's attack. Interestingly, this is one of the reasons why in today's church we often do not pray for someone “over there.” It is politically incorrect to pray for the church which is being persecuted in the Muslim world — after all, we wouldn't want to appear to be Islamophobic. If you cannot struggle alongside them in prayer your prayers will sound trite and meaningless. We don't like that feeling; therefore we sometimes refuse to pray at all.

What to Pray for

Unlike Paul in this situation, we most commonly get a prayer request for another church in the form of some special and specific need. This apparently was not the case in this instance; that's fortunate for us, because it gives us Paul's thought on what you can always pray for.

- ✚ First, he asks that their hearts may be encouraged. This is simple enough; most of us need a little encouragement now and then, because the, attack of Satan is to produce gray day Christianity. Each day tends to blend into the next one; there's nothing particularly outstanding or terrible that's going on; we get bored. When we get bored we often get discouraged, slowly.

- ✚ Next, he prays for the unity of the church, asking that they be “knit together in love.” If you’ve ever seen someone knitting a sweater or a scarf you know that the end product hangs together quite well. That’s rather surprising when you consider that you started out with a straight line of yarn. It’s that kind of cozy, comfortable loving each other atmosphere that Paul is seeking here.
- ✚ He then prays for the full assurance of their understanding. This sounds a little vague, but what he’s doing here is praying that they will overcome the doubt that is normal in the church which has never met one of the living apostles. That’s our situation as well.

God’s Mystery

We must begin by clearing up a bit of a problem in the English language. To readers since the second half of the nineteenth century, the word mystery implies a particular type of literary fiction. Think of Sherlock Holmes. That’s not what the word means here in the original. God has not asked us to solve some sort of puzzle to figure out who Christ is. Rather, the word refers to the fact that God had kept the Ministry of Christ locked up, with only certain prophecies sufficient to make recognition sure, during the times of the Old Testament. It’s possible we could better translate this word as “secret.” Paul’s prayer includes the idea that the Colossians will get a true knowledge of this — that is to say, a true knowledge of Christ himself. Christ is the central mystery of the Old Testament; the answer to this mystery is revealed in the New Testament.

This is why Paul prays that they will get a “true understanding” of Christ. The nature of Christ is not something that can be readily deduced from nature, nor, for that matter, from the writings of the Old Testament. Those writings make sense as prophesying Christ, but they leave out an awful lot of the detail. In particular it’s rather vague that Christ’s sacrifice would apply to someone other than the Jews. This is the part that God was keeping hidden from the Jews, to be revealed at the right time. Because this is revealed knowledge, rather than deductive philosophy, it’s important that you get your revelation right. As we shall see, Paul is worried about the Gnostic influences on these people and the very real possibility that they will get a knowledge of Christ which is based upon somebody’s brilliant deductions rather than on what the Scriptures reveal.

See to It

Colossians 2:4-8 NASB I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. (5) For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ. (6) Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so* walk in Him, (7) having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and* overflowing with gratitude. (8) See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

Persuasive Argument

Permit me to introduce you to one of the great developments in the art of thinking:



This is the “Good Idea Fairy.” Generally not visible, this being is detected by the sound of a loud “klonk” followed by somebody saying, “I have a good idea!” The idea in question usually is anything but good. Paul evidently had encountered the same thing. The word translated “persuasive” in verse four can also be translated “seductive” or “enticing.” It does not carry with it the idea of a logically sound argument but one that sounds good. It’s particularly difficult to counter these things, especially when the person putting forward is better educated or more intelligent than you are. But better education and more intelligence do not necessarily imply that the person is right. So how do you know when you’re getting enticing philosophy?

- ✚ Ask the first question: where did this idea come from? If it came out of something that’s traditional with men around you, something which is ingrained in your society but absent from the Scriptures you are probably dealing with the Good Idea Fairy. Klonk!
- ✚ It may not be something traditional; it may be something that people have dreamed up as a logical argument. A very good example of this is the impact of feminist extremism on the church. Once upon a time the church taught that the husband was to be the head of the marriage relationship, just as Christ is the head of the church. But this doesn’t make logical sense to us now that we know that men and women are completely interchangeable parts. Logic should come after the facts, not before.
- ✚ Sometimes the problem is not philosophical argument but just plain deception. Paul calls it “empty deception.” We have a sufficient number of examples of this, both in heresy and in fraud. Televangelists are not a total loss; they can always be used as a bad example.

The first question most people ask about this is simply this: why would anybody do something like this? The answer may be found in verse eight; the phrase that Paul uses, “take you captive,” is used to describe what pirates always call booty. Sometimes the reason for this is that someone’s ego needs inflating.

Desirable

So what is it that Paul thinks is necessary for these people?

- ✚ The first thing he mentions is “good discipline.” The word itself is the Greek word which is the root of our word “taxonomy.” It means to keep things in good order. Discipline, in our time, has come to be synonymous with the word punishment. That’s not what Paul is talking about here; what he’s trying to get across is that things have to be done in the right way in the right order. And he praises these people for doing it that way.
- ✚ Interestingly, the next thing he mentions is the stability of their faith. Their doctrine does not change with every wind of new thinking. The Orthodox Jew begins his prayers with, “Our God and the God of our Fathers.” The reason is simply this: you must pray to “our God” because praying to somebody else’s just isn’t going to help. But so that you do not get disturbed by every new thought, you look back upon the tradition of your fathers in the faith. You need both; faith should have stability. Doctrine is not a roller coaster ride.
- ✚ Such a disciplined, stable faith is rooted in the fact that you follow the instruction given by Christ and his apostles. It is not something that you reinvent. Most people know this, but every generation has its share of people who are boldly going where no doctrine has gone before. If your faith is not both disciplined and stable, then I suggest to you that you need to examine it in the light of the Scriptures.

Results

There are two results that Paul gives here. If you do it right, and your faith is stable and disciplined, rooted in the teaching of the apostles, these are the results you should expect.

- ✚ The first is that your faith will be firmly rooted, well built up and solidly established. Such a faith is often admired by people who have no idea how to get it. The reason for this is that we keep looking for cheap tricks that will suddenly and magically increase our faith. Such a faith is built slowly but steadily upon prayer, study and the ongoing positive discipline of the church. If you do it God’s way the first time, it works.
- ✚ This should not surprise you: the second effect is that you will be overflowing with gratitude. As you grow to appreciate your faith even more, there dawns on you a sense that you did not deserve this. You were given something is a gift which her own efforts do not justify. The only real parallel I can think of for this is a long-term, stable marriage. After forty years or so you regularly thank God that he gave you such a wonderful wife.

Fullness of Christ

Colossians 2:9-12 NASB For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, (10) and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; (11) and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; (12) having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

Paul now begins his discourse on correct doctrine.

Incarnation

One of the key point to the Christian faith which astounds a lot of new Christians is that we believe — and have since the beginning of the church — the Christ himself is both fully man and fully God. Most of the Gnostic heresies deny one or the other of these things, if not both. What does this mean?

- ✚ For Christ to be fully man, that is to say, fully human, carries with it the implication that he understands and shares in our suffering. He knows what it is to get up with his back aching and his feet cold. He suffers as we suffer, and therefore can be the source of our consolation. He's been there and done that, as the phrase goes. So when praying to Christ we're not talking to someone who does not understand what it is to be human; he is a man like us.
- ✚ But he also is fully and completely God. Most Christians will tell you that they don't understand how he can be both. That's one of those things about revelation; he never said you'd understand it, he just said that it is so. It certainly carries with it the implication that if you pray to him, you are asking for the power of God in your own life.

This is not just dry dogma. If you want to have a personal relationship with someone, you have to know who the person is. If the person in your Internet chat room says they're twenty-five and really crazy about fat old bald married guys, you may be in for a bit of a surprise on your first face-to-face meeting. The relationship just might not work out. Knowing who the other person is, is absolutely critical to developing a good relationship. That applies to Christ as well as to anybody else, if not more so.

For in Him

We said that this is not just dry dogma. Look at some of the implications that Paul draws for us.

- ✚ The first is that you are complete. Make the comparison to the religions that were around at the time. You might have to worship it more than one temple, because the fertility goddess and the crop goddess and the war god were in three different places. In Christ, you have everything you need.
- ✚ Not only that, Christ is the one with all authority. He is entitled by right to rule over the church and each of its members — including you. For Americans who typically like to reject authority whenever possible, this may seem somewhat strange. But I submit that's our problem, not His. If you are obedient to him you are doing what is right.

So how is it that one follows Christ? Just what is it that you do that makes you a real Christian (other than taking communion)?

- ✚ First, there is obedience. Even if you don't understand, you can obey the commands. This may be the beginner's way of doing it, but it works.
- ✚ Next, the Christian principle has always been the imitation of Christ. The fad of "What Would Jesus Do" is fading, but the principle of the imitation of Christ is still sound.
- ✚ If you know him for the God that he is, then your worship of him will come naturally. He is worthy of all praise, for he is God.

Baptism

Christ gives you an excellent example of those three principles in his own baptism. John the Baptist didn't understand why Christ should be baptized — but he was obedient, and did it. Just as he was baptized (by immersion) so we should be baptized too. One of the reasons he was baptized, according to Chrysostom, was so that no member of the royalty would think it beneath him. If the King of Kings is baptized, surely the archduke can do likewise.

Just why is baptism so important? Well, first it is a parallel to circumcision; that is to say, it is the entrance ritual to Christianity. Why do we have entrance rituals? So that the person being initiated can point to a definite, specific time and say, "at that moment I became a Christian." We need that;

otherwise we will always have the question of whether or not we really have done everything to become a Christian.

Symbolically — and most rituals are simply acted out symbolism — baptism signifies are sharing the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. The catch, of course, is the same one that exists with all other rituals: how do I know this really works? The answer is simple: God raised Christ from the dead. He promises he will raise you from the dead if you will follow Christ. No one else in human history predicted his own death, burial and resurrection — and then made it happen. As the great philosopher Leo Durocher once put it, “it ain’t braggin’ if you can do it”.

Set Your Mind - Colossians 2:13 – 3:4

Change in Nature

Colossians 2:13-17 NASB (13) When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, (14) having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. (15) When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. (16) Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day-- (17) things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

You Were Dead

One of the most distressing points made in the Scriptures is simply this: you sin, you die. The greatest example of this is found in Genesis, with Adam. Here is a man with a perfect heredity and no parents to mess it up. He's in a perfect environment; he's given a perfect job and a perfect wife — who seems to have no problem whatsoever going around absolutely naked. The only complication is that he has given one rule that he must follow: don't eat from that tree. Violating the rule invokes the death penalty, which gives you an idea of just how seriously God takes sin. This is a reflection of the perfection of God, and the consequence of the imperfection of man.

We may distinguish to separate but connected causes.

- ✚ First, we should acknowledge that there are specific and individual sins which our memories will quickly bring to our minds. It is probable that each and every one of us would be somewhat embarrassed if a complete video of our life story was to play at the local theater.
- ✚ In addition to that, however, we have the fact that it appears that people are sinners by nature. In most of Christendom this is referred to as original sin.

It should be noted that original sin carries with it a sexual connotation. Augustine, who first enunciated the doctrine, needed a mechanism to explain how original sin was passed from one generation to the next. He was quite clear on the fact that there is one thing which certainly occurred in creating the next generation: sex between mom and dad. He therefore concluded that the method of passing original sin from one generation to the next came when the father "lusted" after the mother, resulting in pregnancy. The difficulty with this mechanism is that it implies that sex, even sex between a husband and wife, is intrinsically sinful. Please be careful to note that Paul does not create this doctrine; he simply assumes that it's obvious to you that you were a sinner by nature before Christ changed your nature. The impact of the Greek philosophical idea that the flesh — or anything material — is intrinsically evil might possibly be the connecting thread. At this point we must leave the matter to the reader; the important point is that it is not just your specific transgressions but the fact that you are human and fallen that made you dead.

How Christ Dealt with This

Paul now tells us that Christ made us alive by forgiving our sins. It is an astounding statement. We may well ask two important questions. The first is, by what right did Christ forgive our sins. The second is like it; by what method did he forgive our sins.

Let's take the question of method first. Paul makes the comparison here to something called a "certificate of debt." Think about it this way. If you buy a house, you most likely will have to take out a mortgage. That means the bank has loaned you the money for the house and you must pay it back. Members of an older generation will remember the existence of something called a "mortgage button." Picture a thumbtack with an ivory head which was driven into the lowest part of the banister of a staircase in the house to signify that the house had been paid off. In this view your sins are debt — and Christ paid that debt at the cross.

Of course, one might object that such sins as I have committed were offenses against other people — and therefore only those other people have the right to forgive me. I would make two points in contrast to this:

- ✚ The first is that every sin against someone else is also a sin against God, who has provided us with our standard of conduct. So at the very least Christ is entitled to forgive us on behalf of God, for he is divine.
- ✚ Perhaps more important is this: the people I have sinned against may have no means of exacting retribution from me. God, on the other hand, has every means needed. It is a practical fact: if God forgives you, your enemy's retribution is pretty much meaningless.

There is a formal aspect to this also. One occasionally hears of a criminal case in which the District Attorney's office refuses to file charges for one reason or another. That does not affect the actual guilt or innocence of the accused; but it certainly affects what happens to them. In that same sense Christ at the cross has forbidden the accuser of mankind to bring accusation against his children. Satan has been denied the right to be the accuser of your soul. If there is no accusation there is no trial. If there is no trial there is no guilt. If there is no guilt there is no punishment.

As a side note, it should be noted that this set of facts is what we commemorate in communion. Lately, we have been encouraged to "pause and reflect" during communion, without specifying what we are to reflect about. The older method which commanded us, "let a man examine himself," points us specifically to our sins. I leave the decision as to whether or not we have improved things as an exercise to the reader.

Act As Judge

Just as Christ has prevented the process of accusation from occurring in the spiritual realm, we are in this passage forbidden to allow this in the physical realm as well. We are not to let someone accuse us on the basis of such things as what we eat and drink. This warning is not something which is lost its effect with time. The most recent instance of such an accusation concerns alcohol. Before the twentieth century most Christians considered that consuming alcohol was a normal part of life. For a variety of reasons the temperance movement arose in the United States, and Christians were told that drinking alcohol was absolutely sinful under all circumstances. We were persuaded that the apostles used grape juice instead of wine for the Last Supper. (This, by the way, is false.) Throughout Christian history there have been various pious prohibitions proclaimed.

To get your thinking straight, there is nothing wrong with having a personal rule which forbids alcohol — or pork, or meat in general, or mashed potatoes for that matter. An alcoholic will do well to prohibit himself alcohol. What is forbidden here is judgment on that basis.

What's interesting is the reason that Paul gives for this. He could certainly justify this based upon Christ's prohibitions on judgment. He does not. He points out that such self-restraint, such a set of rules is nothing more than a foreshadowing of what is to come when Christ returns. At the return of Christ, sin and death are destroyed. There is therefore no known reason for such a rule to last into that era. The particular reason for this is that the "substance" belongs to Christ. The Greek word used for substance might be translated in the vernacular as, "the real thing." (The Greek word is soma, which is also the word that is used for "body.") So we are allowed to have such rules as temporary expedients to get us through this life, but we are not allowed to judge our fellow Christian based on such things.

False Humility

Colossians 2:18-23 NASB (18) Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, (19) and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. (20) If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, (21) "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (22) (which all *refer to* things destined to perish with use)--in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? (23) These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, *but are* of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Keep Defrauding

Of course, most of us don't think of ourselves as being particularly judgmental. In Fact, these things usually arise from people of the position of leadership of one sort or another. So the question naturally arises, who are these people and how do I know what they look like?

The first thing to look for is what Paul refers to as an inflated, fleshly mind. Pay particular attention to the phrase, "keep defrauding." It means that this action is something which is continually done. When not looking out for somebody here who makes a mistake; that's going to happen to all of us. We're going to have dumb ideas. What we are looking for is someone who continually does this. There are two symptoms in particular that Paul points out:

- ✚ The first is a delight in "self abasement." Other translations are a little more helpful here, using the phrase "false humility." This is the guy who informs you that he is, shucks, just a good old boy, one of the people who happens to be gosh awful humble. Remember, overstating how little you are is a form of lying.
- ✚ The second is rather specific: the worship of angels. This is a specific instance of a Gnostic heresy — the idea that you had some sort of revelation brought to you by an angel just specifies the delivery method. A good example for most Americans is Mormonism; Joseph Smith claimed to have been visited by an angel named Moroni. It's hard making up good biblical names.

The Solution

Of course, practically any teacher can — and will, at one time or another — get the idea that he has come across something that is radically, wonderfully revealing and obviously correct. The question then is what do you do with it. You need, as a teacher, to have the humility to say that this may be very brilliant but also wrong. You need to test it, and testing it is done against the word of Christ. As Thomas à Kempis put it,

The teaching of Jesus far transcends all the teachings of the Saints and whosoever has His spirit will discover concealed in it heavenly manna.

You go off track when you get disconnected from Jesus. It's that simple. But if you are connected to Jesus, then you are connected to his church. Paul tells us three things about this kind of connection:

- ✚ First, it is a source of supply. Again and again the teacher finds that he must go back to Christ. There is such a thing as writer's block; there is such a thing as teacher's block. The solution is in Christ.
- ✚ Second, everything holds together in Christ. If you're comparing two sections of Scripture and wonder how they can possibly both be true, the answer will inevitably be found in Christ. It usually will not be found in cleverness.
- ✚ Finally, as the teacher will tell you, if you are in Christ you are growing.

Identify the Problem

There are three things in this passage I would point out to you as dangerous.

- ✚ The first is self-made religion. My son gave me an interesting distinction in this; he compared natural and synthetic religion. Synthetic religion is focused around the man in the pew; it's designed to move, motivate and bless that man. Natural religion is designed to worship God. Religion that God designs does this, as it should. Religion that man designs must therefore focus on something else — and making the man in the pew feel good is usually the most profitable.
- ✚ The second is the danger of false humility. We have been taught so much that humility is a virtue, and a rare one, that any manifestation of it appears quite charming. But remember that false humility is just that: false. If you're lying about your humility, you're still lying.
- ✚ The third concerns the severe treatment of the body. If you have someone who is constantly working up passion over the issue of fasting, the prohibition of certain foods or drinks, or anything else which relates to the idea that what you do to the body is the most important thing you can do, you have somebody who is missing the point.

Set Your Mind on Things Above

Colossians 3:1-4 NASB Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (2) Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. (3) For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (4) When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Diversion

The reader will note we have consistently used the New American Standard Bible in this lesson. If you will look at verse two, you will see why. The opening phrase is, "set your mind." If you examine this same passage in the New International Version you will see the phrase, "set your heart." It is a

cautionary tale. An examination of the Greek will show you that the translation we have used is correct, and that heart is the wrong word. The translators of the NIV knew this as well as we would. But Bible translation is not an exact science. Where did the NIV get this phrasing?

The answer, simply, is that this phrasing came from the King James. That translation uses the word “affections.” Where did the King James get it? From the agreement in the two most prominent translations which came before it: the Geneva Bible (the Bible used by the Pilgrims in America) and the Bishops Bible, the official version of the Church of England at the time. The King James being somewhat of a compromise in translation, this fortuitous agreement was adopted as correct. The NIV simply carried it forward into modern language. Their argument would be that it is easier to understand; the NASB typically strives for a more accurate, literal translation. There’s a reason you have more than one translation on your shelves.

The difficulty, of course, comes in today’s anti-intellectual attitude in the Christian churches. It is a common thought in the brotherhood which your teacher espouses that intellectual Christians are, by definition, hypocrites. “Check your brain at the door, because God wants your heart.” Translating the Scriptures is not for the faint of heart.

Raised up

In an oblique reference to baptism, Paul points out that you have been “raised up.” The key thing to note is that your new status is not because you have volunteered for baptism, but because God has done something for you. It’s not something you did for yourself. A common parallel used is that you have accepted a gift. If you’re going to brag about it, you have to state that you are smart enough to have seen the obvious.

So what should you do about it? You had a change of direction when you become a Christian; more importantly, you had a change of destination. Focus on the new destination, or as Paul puts it here, such your mind on things above. Let me give you some examples.

- ✚ Consider your marriage. If you’re not a Christian, marriage is a balance of power arrangement — and you want the balance of power to favor you. Once you become a Christian, your model for marriage is no longer balance of power, but the relationship of Christ and his church. Space does not permit a full explanation of this — but it’s definitely different.
- ✚ Next, look at what you’re ambitious about. Most of us have enough ambition to at least get by; some of us have a lot more. That’s not so much the problem as the direction of the ambition. Direct your ambition to being the kind of Christian you should be.
- ✚ Perhaps the most telling of all is this: pride. The world considers pride a virtue; arrogance is to be treasured. In the church, the comparison is between you and Christ — which does tend to greatly diminish pride.

Hidden with Christ

When you do this, the world around you isn’t going to “get it.” They do not see what you see — the truth of Christ. As a result, they’re going to be puzzled by your actions. In particular their going to wonder why you don’t do the things you used to do. To them, you are “hidden.”

There are three primary areas in which the Christian’s conduct changes.

- ✚ The first is with regard to the flesh. At the time of this writing American society is absolutely fixated on sex. It is inconceivable to the average American that you would not act in a manner which would maximize the number of people with whom you have sexual intercourse. The Christian, on the other hand, looks at the relationships of this world as either practice or the beginning of relationships in eternity.
- ✚ The second is with regard to the world — things like your car, boat, house and so forth. The world sees this as being a case of bigger is better. The Christian sees things as opportunities to spend money — some of which fit in this world, some of which are on things above. It's a great moment in Christian growth when you give up something the world thinks is wonderful (for example, that cruise ship tour) in favor of giving someone else in the world a chance to hear the gospel.
- ✚ Finally, there is pride. As we mentioned above, arrogance is considered a virtue in this world. If you can shout down your opponent, if you can humiliate those who are of different opinion, the world considers you a wonderful, successful person. It's just possible that you are a wonderful, successful jerk.

Ultimately, the source of your actions will be revealed. At the very latest this will happen when Christ returns, and the things that are spiritual will become the things that are obvious. The problem is, it's too late to do anything about it then.

The New Man - Colossians 3:5-14

Wrath of God

Colossians 3:5-7 NASB Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. (6) For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, (7) and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them.

The reader will recall from the previous lesson that Paul admonishes us to set our minds on things above. The process of doing this produces the initial word “therefore” in this passage.

God’s Wrath?

One of the curious beliefs to which modern man has fallen victim is what might be called “the loving God.” This particular belief is that God himself evidently has no moral convictions whatsoever; it is considered that they cannot be required when compared to love. In other words, if you have a choice between being right and being loving you always pick being loving. This is most commonly applied to matters which deal with sex. When this author was a young man it was a common argument that God could not possibly disapprove of any form of sex outside of marriage because, after all, he is a loving God. In this view, right and wrong *always* give way to a vague, amorphous form of love which sees neither right nor wrong but only squishy happiness.

A similar belief system, and a bit older, is what I call “Santa God.” God, in this view, is some sort of cosmic blessing generator whose purpose in existence is to make you happy. Anything God does is supposed to make you happy. Therefore, if you are not happy, it’s obviously some failure on God’s part either to perceive your needs or to be able to deliver them. On the other hand, whatever you do that makes you happy is perfectly okay with Santa God. Note that both of these views place you in charge of what God thinks. His opinions must conform to your thought.

The truth is much more difficult. God faces what might be called the “divine dilemma.” God is love; therefore he wants none of us to go to hell. God is righteous; therefore some of us sinners — the unrepentant ones — are going to hell. There is no sense saying, “God can.” Putting the phrase “God can” in front of nonsense doesn’t change it from being nonsense. It’s what Aristotle called an “impossible impossible.” That’s something that’s intrinsically impossible, like saying that yellow is square. God’s solution to the divine dilemma is found at the cross, where his love provides the way for his righteousness to be satisfied. It is that act that changes us.

Consider... Us Dead

That, of course, is the gospel. One of the painful impacts of the “loving God” and “Santa God” theories is that the recipient of God’s love has no need to change. We’re just fine; fixing things is God’s problem. Paul differs. In what I suspect was a rather hurriedly scratched out list, he tells us the things that we should put aside now that we are members of the body of Christ. Here’s his laundry list.

✚ He begins with immorality — the Greek word is *porneia*, from which we get our word pornography. Interestingly, the word does not mean pornography — but it does include fornication, adultery and incest. Evidently the Colossians were not particularly saintly people before becoming Christians.

- ✚ Next he lists impurity — the word in the Greek is related to our word “catharsis.” It means someone who refuses to clean up his act; someone who never repents. If you’re Jewish, the best translation might perhaps be “unclean.” It’s the moral equivalent of leprosy.
- ✚ In what might seem a little odd, he next lists passion. The word in the Greek is pathos, and it means an inordinate affection or lust to the point of suffering for it. It is desire gone completely out of control.
- ✚ The next phrase is somewhat complicated; “evil desire.” When you dig through it what it really means is a longing for that which is forbidden. Adam and Eve would have something to say about this.

The last item he mentions is greed. What’s fascinating about it is that he equates it to idolatry. It’s not hard to understand; if your greed is motivated by the fear that God will not provide for you — and therefore you have to get the money by whatever means you can — you are worshiping the money instead of God. That is idolatry. This particular word however includes a little nuance. It’s associated with the acts of fraud and extortion. It’s not just that you’re chasing the money; it’s that you’re squeezing it out of others.

You Also Once Walked

All in all, these folks don’t seem to be particularly morally upright prior to their conversion. It’s important for us to remember that there is only one qualification for becoming a Christian: you have to be a sinner first.³ But we might wish to consider here a problem which has vexed the church since the beginning: just what kind of people are you going to allow to come to church? Your author has known the church which prohibited most black people from entering on the grounds that “we need to preserve the character of our witness.” (That’s been a few years ago, by the way.) The church has had a number of approaches to this problem.

- ✚ The most common approach is that of the parish — everybody in a specific geography is welcome. At least in theory, they’re welcome.
- ✚ A more modern approach is what might be called the specialty church — a church that’s dedicated primarily to motorcycle riders, for example. The good news is, motorcycle riders have a church. The bad news is, no one else’s sure they’re welcome there.
- ✚ We also have various parachurch organizations — for example, we have prison ministries. State governments tend to frown on building cathedrals in the middle of a prison exercise yard.

The problem in modern time comes down to something like this: how do we accept — and indeed welcome — the homosexual without approving of homosexuality? Many churches today simply stop disapproving of homosexuality in order that they may be inclusive. This is a principle which can be extended to some interesting lengths. It is a very cheap way to avoid the pain of loving the sinner while hating the sin. The right method takes work; the wrong method lends itself well to mass publicity.

Sins of the Mouth and Mind

Colossians 3:8-11 NASB But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, *and* abusive speech from your mouth. (9) Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its *evil* practices, (10) and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him-- (11) *a renewal* in

³ All together in chorus now: "and some of us are exceedingly well qualified."

which there is no *distinction between* Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

Control of the Tongue

One of the most cheerful facts about Christianity is that its ethics and moral practices strongly resembled those that your mother taught you when you were a kid. Watching what you say, keeping your mouth shut, and thinking before you speak are things your mother told you that you should do. We may review this from the Scriptures.

First, control of the tongue is a sign of wisdom.

Proverbs 17:27 NASB He who restrains his words has knowledge, And he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.

It is also a sign of true religion.

James 1:26 NASB If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this man's religion is worthless.

The truth of the matter is simple: what's flowing out of your mouth is the overflow of what's happening in your mind. And Christ is greatly concerned with what's happening in your mind; therefore we should be greatly concerned with our speech.

Put Aside

So we begin again with another list of things you shouldn't be doing. Once again, in chorus with your mother, we are saying, "don't do dumb things." Here's Paul's list of dumb things.

- ✚ The first is anger. The root word in the Greek is *orge*, from which we get our word *orgy*. The emphasis of the word is on the emotion of anger, passion out of control.
- ✚ Next is what is referred to here as *wrath* (the NIV has *rage*). This is sometimes translated as "fierceness." The actual Greek word is a bit of onomatopoeia; it means heavy breathing.
- ✚ Paul follows that with the word *malice*, which is a general word for wickedness — just in case he forgot something else.

Paul then moves on to three very specific types of speech, which do not necessarily carry with them the connotation of rage and anger.

- ✚ The first is *slander* — the Greek word is the one from which we get our word "blasphemy." In our modern day this would probably have to include such things as *libel* as well (libel is printed or otherwise in electronic documents; slander is spoken). We would do well to remember the prohibition against gossip as well. (The distinction is that gossip may be true in fact, where slander and libel are not.)
- ✚ The next is "abusive speech." This is a polite euphemism in the Greek for filthy language. If you wonder why this prohibition is here, look at it this way: have you ever seen someone who exhibits great self-control and also uses filthy language?
- ✚ Finally, he tells us not to lie to one another. That may seem rather obvious to us today, but almost all cultures have an acceptable list of lies. Some of them seem innocuous enough — and certainly a little tact goes a long way. If you think not, husband, be careful the next time your wife asks you, "Does this dress make me look fat?"

Why Not?

To a new Christian this sense of self-control may seem somewhat strange. The experienced Christian knows better, but we have to remember that we all start somewhere. The reason quite simply is that you have put on Christ; you are a new creature.

This, of course, makes sense to the experienced Christian. To the new Christian however it may seem quite puzzling. So Paul explains it. He tells us that you have access to the knowledge (the word in the Greek means a full knowledge, not a partial knowledge) of the icon of God — that is to say, Christ. So let's take it step by step:

- ✚ It used to be that you didn't know what you are doing, so you did whatever felt good at the moment. You had no self-control.
- ✚ Now you know what you're supposed to be doing; so you're going to have to change.
- ✚ That "knowing" is not a list of rules and regulations, but an example to follow — the imitation of Christ.

Verse twelve may seem to have been stuck in here by somebody with a pair of scissors and a paste pot. To us it doesn't seem to fit logically. To the people of that time, however, it made a great deal of sense. They were accustomed to the idea that "we" were the civilized, intelligent people on this planet and that "they" were a bunch of religious hicks, barbarians or low class, good for nothing sorts. It would just seem natural to them that there would be a different set of rules and regulations for the good guys ("us") than for everybody else. The problem with this view is that it completely underestimates what Christ does to the human being. Christianity is not the process of receiving the revised standard version of the rules and regulations for civilized behavior. It is a total transformation of the human being from the inside out. Therefore, distinctions of race, class, slave and free, barbarian and civilized cease to have any real significance.

You might think this is a completely obsolete sentence then. It is not. We have the same problem today when someone who has been raised right, is basically a good person meets another new Christian who was raised to a much lower set of standards. There is a natural feeling that if your mother raised you right, you are better than the other guy. You're not. You're still a sinner; that's a yes/no question.

Bond of Unity

Colossians 3:12-14 NASB (12) So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; (13) bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. (14) Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

C. S. Lewis made an interesting distinction between men and women. In his time, he observed, when you talked about Christian charity men usually took this to mean something that you did in the way of putting up with what others did. Women, on the other hand, typically meant something you did for someone else. As he observed, both of these are correctly labeled Christian charity; perhaps we should consider doing both.

Doing for Others

We can identify three major ways in which we can conduct Christian charity for others, as outlined in these verses.

- ✚ The first is compassion. It should be noted that while the group form of compassion — for example, assisting a missionary project in Kenya, done by hundreds of people in our church — is given the most publicity, it is not the only form. There is also a question of compassion for individuals. The simplest example I can give you is the fellow standing by the stop sign with the cardboard message asking for help. It's not nearly as glamorous, but it's still compassion.
- ✚ The second is kindness. The word in the Greek is a form of general moral excellence — the kind of person who can be relied on to do the right thing. So very often the right thing is not a scowl but a smile, and some practical help.
- ✚ The third, which may surprise many, is gentleness. It comes as a surprise to many Christians to think of it this way, but the Christian is the most powerful person on earth. The question alone has access to God Almighty through the blood of Jesus, the Christ. Great power is best used when clothed in gentleness.

Bearing with Others

Paul gives us three attributes here which are part of bearing with others, faults included.

- ✚ The first is humility. Nothing so graces the Christian's forbearance as humility. It is exceedingly irritating to have someone condescend to put up with you because, after all, they are "that kind of person." Look at it from the sinner's point of view: it's a lot easier for the humble man to obtain your repentance than it is for the proud man who looks down on you and tells you what you should have done.
- ✚ Next is patience. The word is almost untranslatable from the Greek; it begins with the partial word "macro", which tells you that you're going to need a lot of it. It is that kind of patience which just doesn't give up on other people. This is a very useful thing to have, but a bit on the expensive side when it comes to experience.
- ✚ We then have bearing with and forgiving each other. Often enough it is not feasible for the older Christian to straighten out what the younger Christian has just done. Maturity often tells you that your own mistakes at a younger age have just been echoed. If you think back to those days, you will probably recall some senior saint who smiled and put up with you. Go thou, and do likewise.

Love — the Bond of Unity

Well, now that you have the pieces, you need to put it all together. Paul is not giving us these attributes simply to make us better people. He has another purpose here: the unity of the church. If you don't have these attributes commonly distributed amongst the members of the church, they will soon become a contentious lot. So, above all else, you are commanded to love one another. This is the great binding strap which holds the church together. We have plenty of forces which tend to terrorist apart; indeed, more than enough. But we are reminded that the world knows that we are real Christians by the way we love one another. If we are constantly squabbling with each other, the average citizen of the world Mike just well ask what purpose there could possibly be in becoming a Christian. After all, don't we have enough argument and factionalism already? Do we need more by joining the church?

Throughout this lesson there has been one constant message: the imitation of Christ. The love that Christ showed to us on the cross is the love that he is expecting us to imitate in him. Make the

imitation of Christ your first principle, and all these virtues flow out of it. If you want to build a boat, you'll need the dockyard plans. If you want to build an airplane, you'll need the engineering diagrams. If you want to build a child of God, you will need the example of Christ to be imitated.

Submission - Colossians 3:15-4:1

Christ in You

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

(Colossians 3:15-17)

Peace of Christ

Readers of old detective novels will know the phrase, “breach of the peace.” It is a crime; it means to disturb the general tranquility of the neighborhood in some manner or another. The concept descends from medieval times. In those days each member of the nobility was considered to have his own “peace.” To disturb him in that peace was a crime. The higher the nobility, the greater the crime. In short, the boss liked things tranquil — and intended to keep things that way. Generally speaking, this conduces to the betterment of society. We may consider that the King of Kings has his peace as well — and he likes things tranquil too. So if you accept the concept that Christ has his own peace, and as a member of his kingdom you must accept the idea that you need to get along tranquilly with the other members of his kingdom — right?

Why is this so? Because we are one body. Argument in dissension tends to tear the church apart; it is the prayer of Christ that we should all be one. The unity of the church is something which is extremely important to him, and therefore should be extremely important to us. We should then behave in such a way as to preserve the peace, and therefore the unity, of the church.

It is interesting to see how Paul prescribes a method for us doing: “be thankful.” Perhaps you’ve never made the connection between gratitude and peace, but it’s really hard to be mad at someone, scream at them and then say thank you. Try it sometime; it’s downright humorous. If you live your life in gratitude for the things that Christ has done for you — not just at the Cross, but in your own day to day living — it’s difficult for you to be angry with those who are members of his body. Often enough, anger comes from the sense of being entitled to something. We feel offended when somebody takes something that belongs to us; we also feel offended when somebody, for example, takes over a job in the church that we thought was ours. It’s normal in an organization that little fiefdoms develop. People will be possessive about a broom closet. We need to remember that this should not be so; the preventative is for us to be thankful for what we have, and what we are given. We are not entitled to a position; but we are given a work.

Word Dwell Richly

For most of us, this will initially be somewhat difficult. Christ understands that we need help; therefore we are commanded to let the word of Christ richly dwell within us. So just how do we do that?

- ✚ The first method is in wisdom and teaching. It’s perfectly normal for human beings to have to be instructed in something which is new to them. You went to school; your parents, at least, thought there was good reason for this. Clearly, you want to get to the point where you can go it on your

own in reading, for example — but you must start somewhere. The same is true for the Christian; we need that instruction in wisdom to get us started. Most Christians find that they need it throughout their lives. Some get to the point where they find it so necessary that they become teachers, for the teacher always learns more than the student in any given lesson.

- ✚ The second method is familiar to many Christians who are not particularly intellectually astute. The truth is that most Christians are not going to pick up a PhD level commentary and use it for casual, light reading. Older Christians will remember that the classic hymns of the church were designed to be easy to memorize (they rhymed) and full of wisdom and instruction. This type of hymn bases itself upon the Psalms, which rhyme in thought. Rhyme, of whatever form, is an aid to memorization. So it is that we get the memorization aid and as well get the emotional strength that a human can bring. The transition to the newer style of music, we must assume, has the same effect for the younger Christian. At least we hope so.
- ✚ We notice also that we are to sing with thankfulness in our hearts. There's that word "thankful" again. Thankfulness makes singing hymns very personal. Older Christians will remember the opening line of the classic doxology, "praise God from whom all blessings flow." It's not just praise; it's thankfulness for our blessings. Our thankfulness breeds our humility; our humility breeds our harmony; our harmony breeds our peace.

The Name

Dorothy Sayers tells us that "we can do all things in the name of Christ — we have the apostle's word for it." It seems a little ridiculous at first; but perhaps an example will make it clearer.

Can you go grocery shopping in the name of Christ? Well, yes you can.

- ✚ First, you can conduct yourself at the grocery store as a Christian might. A gentle politeness in an environment in which people love to bump each other with carts, cut in front of each other in lines, and generally scream at their kids at the same time will at least set some sort of an example. Particularly if you have to take small children with you, this can be a trying time. Do so in the name of Christ, with his peace in your heart.
- ✚ Since you're at the grocery store, give thought to those who are less fortunate than you. Is there someone for whom a meal or two might be very welcome? Perhaps you could pick up something for them and drop it by on your way home. Do so in the name of Christ, who gave his life for you.
- ✚ You probably are going to drive to and from the grocery store. Have you ever been in traffic with a maniac driver who has a bumper sticker that says something like, "follow me to First Self-Righteous Church"?

If you go through life with the idea that you're entitled, that you have your rights and you must demand, you're going to experience a lot of anger. If you go through life seeking to occupy the place in which Christ would have you perform, life is a lot more tranquil. That acceptance of Christ's tasks for you is called submission. It's gotten a lot of bad press lately in the Christian church, but our Lord hasn't changed his mind on the subject.

Be Subject

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who *merely* please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

(Colossians 3:18-22)

Submission

Let's begin by tackling the question of submission directly. We define submission as "the right response to righteous authority." Virtually all Christians in America are in submission to a multitude of authorities. You are in submission to the police department, the fire department, the sewer department, the water department, the trash pickup people, the building inspectors, and any number of other civic authorities. As long as their authority is exercised righteously — and we will tell you about that in a minute — it is your duty as a Christian to obey what you are told; that is, to submit. When the policeman turns on his red flashing lights, you move over. When the sewer inspector says that you need to change out the pipe, you're in for a bill. It's really pretty simple.

The truth is: you want authority over you. You like to have your sewers to work; you want the police to clear maniac drivers off the road; it would be really nice of the fire department responded to your 911 call; building inspectors may seem to be a pain, but having the building fall down in an earthquake is even more so — and so on. The problem with this comes in the abuse of authority. Paul, in this passage, is not dealing with abuse but rather the correct use of authority. If we take this step by step I believe you will be able to see the why and the wherefore of authority and submission.

The key to understanding this is the relationship between authority and submission: responsibility. If the authority you're dealing with is one in which authority matches responsibility, then you are dealing with righteous authority. Let me give you an example that may seem a bit humorous when we get done. Let's suppose that you are young ardent feminist, living alone in an apartment, with your cat. It's three o'clock in the morning. You're sound asleep and awaken to what appears to be the sound of someone breaking down your front door with an ax. You're sleeping in the nude and have just achieved enough consciousness to wonder whether or not you need to get your bathrobe before you call 911 when your bedroom door breaks open. In runs a Neanderthal with an ax. He scoops you up and throws you over his shoulder then picks up the cat in the crook of the ax. He carries the both of you out the front door, down the stairs and dumps you rather unceremoniously on the nearest green lawn. My question is this: what's the first thing you say to him?

The correct answer is: "thank you very much." Why is this the correct answer? Because he's a fireman, and your apartment building was on fire. In any other circumstances he's a criminal, but a fireman's responsibilities include breaking down your front door and dragging you out of a burning building. He's done an even better job by rescuing the cat.

You see the secret: his authority matches his responsibility. His authority is also righteous in the sense that it is given to him by the local government. All righteous authority descends from Christ⁴, and we are explicitly told that the government is an agent of God for our benefit. Net result: the fireman is a hero, not a weirdo.

⁴ see Matthew 28:18

This concept — that authority and responsibility must match — is the key to understanding submission. The fear we have of submission comes from those cases in which the authority exceeds the responsibility. That's called tyranny. It also happens that the responsibility exceeds the authority sometimes — who among us has not worked for a boss who told us that we have all the responsibility but check everything with him? But in what follows we shall assume that authority and responsibility do match, and therefore we are dealing with righteous authority.

By the way, this implies that we very often have mutual submission to each other. For example, in the matter of the use of my body, I am in submission to my wife. It is her body; she has authority over my body; I'm not allowed to have sex with anyone without her permission. She has made it very clear that permission to have sex with anyone else is not forthcoming any time soon. We are in mutual submission in this regard, as I have authority over her body in the same manner. Submission is not an absolute; it is a response to responsibility.

Notice please that submission is voluntary. Nobody put a gun to your head to make you become a Christian. Our governments are, at least in theory, subject to the will of the people. Ultimately, as Gandhi found out, if you don't cooperate with the authority it soon ceases to be an authority. So the question is, why would you do a thing like that? Why would you submit to such an authority?

The answer is really simple: it's for your benefit. You want your sewers to work; you want the cops to keep the people of the road who shouldn't be there and so on. It may be that in one particular instance you are not so thankful for this (as in when you get a ticket) but generally speaking, authority is there to benefit you. The ultimate and supreme authority as Christ — and look at the benefit he has brought to you!

Therefore, it is the Christian's duty to provide the right response to righteous authority — that is to say; submission is a requirement of the Christian. Now you see why thankfulness is such an important virtue. It very much makes a difference in dealing with the police department whether or not you are grateful that we have such a thing versus being ungrateful for the fact that they managed to you this time. The attitude of thankfulness is extremely important. To take the most controversial use of the word submission, consider the wife's submission to the husband. Does it make a difference if she is thankful for the fact that God has been kind enough to grant her a husband like this? Or should she take that for granted, and complain about his many faults? Which do you think makes for a happier marriage?

Examples

Paul gives us three examples of submission.

✚ He tells wives to be in submission to their husbands, because this is "fitting." One more time, let's look at it in detail. If you want to know what her submission consists of, you need to know his authority. If you want to know his authority, you must know his responsibility. Paul tells you his responsibility; "love your wives and do not be embittered against them." This, according to feminists, is an absolutely high reaching outrage. You mean my husband has the authority he needs to love me, and to keep him from being bitter against me? That's what I'm objecting to? Please be assured the husband wasn't put in charge because he's better at it. As in much of the Old

Testament, God picked somebody that doesn't necessarily seem to be the most qualified. But he does have the responsibility, given by God. When the wife refuses to submit to that, she's telling God that he made a mistake. She's telling God that her husband should not be responsible for loving her. When you get to an absurdity, the assumptions or the logic must be wrong.

- ✚ He then speaks to fathers dealing with their children. The child is commanded to be obedient — to submit. The father's responsibilities are easily seen: he's warned against exasperating his kids so that they will not "lose heart." Dad is supposed to encourage the kids, and Paul simply warning him against screwing it up. Any of you who had a father who constantly picked at your mistakes and never encouraged you will understand Paul's warning. The solution is not to take dad out of the family, but rather have him live up to his responsibilities.
- ✚ In what seems today to be something that's obsolete, he talks also about slaves and masters. The principle he gives here is that you should not consider your service — let's say we're talking about your employer — as being dedicated to the person in charge but rather to Christ.

In the Name

That last item may need some amplification. When you do something in the name of Christ, you are doing it under the authority of Christ. Don't take that as meaning that you have to put on some sort of ecclesiastical role and marched solemnly about doing whatever it is you're doing; rather consider that it means that you're supposed to do it Christ's way. In short, be obedient. Let people know that you're doing it the way Christ wants you to.

My wife and I are occasionally asked how we have managed to survive so many years of marriage together. The question is often asked by feminists who assume that her submission to her husband cannot possibly bring her any happiness; she must be miserable all the time; and they're extremely puzzled by the smile on her face. The response that we've developed over the years is simply this: "we did it God's way the first time." Trust me; doing it God's way the first time works. And it's a pretty good witness too.

Reward

Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality. Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

(Colossians 3:23-4:1)

Unfairness of Man's Rewards

At some point in a man's career he has to make a decision: just who is he working for? There are three basic options:

- ✚ He could be working for himself. He is working to gratify his own ego, to maintain his own pride — and look out coworkers!
- ✚ He could be working for the company, for the boss. It won't take long to find out that the boss is not very good at recognizing outstanding effort or rewarding it. Often times the immediate manager has virtually no power to reward good behavior.
- ✚ Or, if he's a Christian, he can work for Christ. In general, he will not climb the corporate ladder nearly so high if he does this. But then again, the corporate ladder doesn't go on for eternity.

Christ always sees the effort that you make; Christ knows how to judge it correctly. Therefore it is wisdom to be single hearted in your devotion to Christ. You should be warned, however, that this will puzzle your colleagues greatly.

It does solve one immediate puzzle that most workers have. How often have you heard someone complain that there is absolutely no way that he can make his boss happy? It is always possible to please Christ. When you do, the usual reaction you get is that things go rather well — even if they don't go vertically.

Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah; and he did what *was* good, right and true before the LORD his God. Every work which he began in the service of the house of God in law and in commandment, seeking his God, he did with all his heart and prospered.

(2 Chronicles 31:20-21)

Look at it this way: why *wouldn't* Jesus Christ reward you for doing what is good, right and true?

Christ Rewards

Paul here mentions that you will receive the “reward of the inheritance.” It seems rather contradictory. A reward is something you learn for your hard work. An inheritance is something you get because somebody else worked hard and gave it to you — like grace, for example. But that's typical of the kingdom of God. You work out your own salvation, but it is God working within you. I cannot explain how this actually works; I just know that it does.

Perhaps the fact that Paul constantly refers to himself as a bondsman will help us explain this. The essence of the matter is that a slave has a master, not a manager. A manager may not feel himself responsible for the care of the people who work for him; the slave's master is totally responsible for the slave. In particular, the slave's master is responsible for the direction in which all the work will be going. So there is no sense in which the boss (the slave master) has any right complain the slave for picking a particular direction. The slave is supposed to be obedient, not omniscient. In that sense, the slave is relieved of a great responsibility. Pleasing your master is relatively easy: do what you're told, do it wholeheartedly. It begins with obedience and merges into discipleship.

The truth is, as Christ told us, you cannot serve two masters. Either you're going to be your own master, you're going to enslave yourself to someone or something other than yourself, or you going to be a bondsman to Christ. Nothing else works. So pick the one that works. You can please Christ; you may not be too happy with your own results, and trying to please the boss is pretty well known to be very difficult.

Consequences of Wrong

We must admit that the concept that God is righteous, wrathful and likely to render judgment is not at all popular in the church today. But please remember that “popular” is not the same thing as “true.” We think of God as being love; we forget that he is also righteous and just. Ultimately, is righteous and justice require that he pass judgment on those who will not repent. To give you a simple example, do you think that Adolf Hitler got everything he deserved in this life? I don't either.

But if he didn't, where is the justice? Either God is not capable of delivering justice, or he isn't righteous, or is not finished with us yet. Paul, as is certainly prudent for one who is admonishing the followers of Christ, reminds them of the fact that there is to be a judgment. Therefore, we should conduct ourselves in such a manner that Christ, at his return, brings to us the reward of the inheritance rather than the punishment of hell.

Personal Notes - Colossians 4:2-18

Notes

We are taking this section out of order purely for the convenience of education. The section is at the tail end of Colossians, and therefore contains a number of personal notes from Paul.

Tell You Everything

As to all my affairs, Tychicus, *our* beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bond-servant in the Lord, will bring you information. *For* I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts; and with him Onesimus, *our* faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your *number*. They will inform you about the whole situation here.

(Colossians 4:7-9)

It is customary at the end of letters written during this time to include a number of personal notes. It is often convenient for the teacher to skip over this section, as we really know quite little about the people who are mentioned in it. In this particular instance, however, we have a hint as to the passion which is involved. Notice that both men mentioned are referred to as a “beloved brother.” It costs Paul quite a bit to send these people back home to carry the news. Remember, Paul is in chains, in jail. That’s not comfortable, and it is often a very lonely experience.

In particular we have one name which does occur elsewhere in the New Testament — Onesimus. We know him from the book of Philemon. Onesimus was a runaway slave, and it is possible that this is the time at which Paul sent him home to his master. His master was Philemon. Please appreciate the peril of Onesimus in this instance. For a runaway slave, Philemon would’ve had the right to insist that he face a wild animal in the arena to prove that he was still worthy to live. He would certainly have been branded with the mark of a runaway slave on his forehead. It is most likely that he would’ve been castrated, to prevent any rebellious offspring. Paul sent with him a letter, which is now known as the book of Philemon, which you should study at your leisure. But consider the temptation it must’ve been to Paul. Philemon was brought to Christ by Paul. So was Onesimus. Had Paul been there to make the case face-to-face, it is likely he would’ve gone back with Onesimus. But Paul is in jail; Onesimus must go home alone, relying on Paul’s letter to Philemon. What a temptation for Paul to simply say that he would write Philemon a note and hang on to Onesimus. Paul’s letter to Philemon is a triumph of courtesy and kindness; Onesimus returned in an act of great courage.

Greetings

Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and *also* Barnabas's cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him); and *also* Jesus who is called Justus; these are the only fellow workers for the kingdom of God who are from the circumcision, and they have proved to be an encouragement to me. Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. For I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and *also* Demas. Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house. When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter *that is coming* from Laodicea.

(Colossians 4:10-16)

It seems that Paul was very much comforted by having those of the Jewish race around him. You can understand why; they share the same stories and background that Paul does. They also share the traditions of the Jews which include great hospitality and care for their fellow Jews who happen to be in prison. I suppose it's like having homeboys with you.

Epaphras, who you will recall was the person who got Paul started on this letter, is mentioned here as "laboring earnestly" in his prayers for the folks at home. Other translations include the phrase, "wrestling in prayer." We'll talk more about this in the next section, but for now it is sufficient to point out that prayer is not, as many of us suspect, something which is dull, inert and takes so little energy.

The main feature of this passage is a minor mystery that has gone unsolved for 2000 years. Paul mentions that the Colossians should read the letter to the Laodicean church. The problem with this is rather simple: we know of no such letter in existence. Apparently Paul wrote them one, and they lost it. Some other books of the Bible have been suggested as being this particular book, in particular the letter to the Ephesians, but no one is really certain of this. I leave it to the reader to discover what can be discovered.

Remember My Chains

Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it." I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.

(Colossians 4:17-18)

Do you see the statement that Paul wrote this letter with his own hand? Most scholars agree that Paul did in fact dictate this letter to someone. It's likely enough that he put his signature at the end so that they would know it was authentically his writing. The suspected reason for this is that apparently Paul had cataracts; to see his own handwriting he had to make it very large. Paul also had some trouble with people writing letters in his name; therefore, it was wise to be prudent enough to include a sample of the handwriting.

Archippus, mentioned here, is the son of Philemon. We don't know what particular ministry had been given to him, but evidently Paul thought it important enough to single him out in a letter that was intended to be read aloud. Generally speaking, Paul is probably not trying to deliver a rebuke, but an encouragement — and also a validation in the eyes of the other believers that the man's mission was given by God.

Finally, it is clear from the rest of the New Testament that being in chains for the cause of Christ is an honor, not a disgrace. It's somewhat like getting a Purple Heart in the U.S. Army; it's proof you've been shot at in combat. Being locked up for the cause of Christ is proof that Satan takes you seriously. It is, therefore, a badge of honor. But it is also a tremendous mark of loneliness. Most of the readers of this work will never have had the opportunity to be inside a prison; but let me give you the closest equivalent — a hospital stay. There are plenty of other human beings around, most of whom don't really care about you personally. Having a smiling, friendly face makes an enormous difference. If you've ever

worked in prison ministry, you know how much more intense that experience is. In Paul's case, it is an experience of controlled agony.

Prayer

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with *an attitude of thanksgiving*; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak.

(Colossians 4:2-4)

Devote Yourself

As Paul noted elsewhere⁵ devoting yourselves to prayer is a reason for not having sex! Do recall that the biblical view of sex is that it is an important part of maintaining your marriage; one of the reasons for getting married is given as being the fact that your sex drive is running and you're having trouble handling it. It's probably more clear to us that it was to the people in Paul's time that this is a major sacrifice. So being devoted to prayer is a normal part of the Christian life when it's running correctly.

The phrase "devote yourselves" reminds us of the necessity of perseverance in prayer⁶. The parable of the Unjust Judge reminds us of this. It's important to remember however that devotion in prayer inherently implies perseverance. If you are devoted to Christ in prayer, you will approach infrequently. It just can't be done any other way.

One reason many Christians are not devoted in prayer is that they think that God is not interested in their little problems. May your poor author share with you a personal note on this? My son is a lawyer who lives on the other side of the continent. The job pays quite well, but includes within its frustrations of dealing with people who are less than ethical and file frivolous lawsuits. Whenever I talk with him over the phone, I ask about how his job is going and what lawsuits he might be involved with. The rules of the business do not allow him to tell me names and companies, but I'm interested to hear what his frustrations are — simply because I'm his father. Your father is interested in what you're doing. So is your heavenly father, even if you think the stuff involved is trivial. He wants to be a part of your life and therefore cares about what you care about. It is therefore reasonable for you to be devoted in prayer and bring him all that small stuff too. All things are subject to prayer — not just the high and the mighty, but the low the trivial just as much.

Keeping Alert

Other translations use the verb "watch" in place of the phrase "keeping alert." The phrasing in question is often used to warn Christians to be alert to the second coming of Christ. We don't hear much about this anymore, at least not in our church. But it is a serious mistake to assume that, since Christ hasn't returned yet, he isn't going to return it all. Paul is warning you that there will come a day of judgment — so watch out!

⁵ First Corinthians 7:5

⁶ Luke 18:1-8, the story of the unjust judge."

The phrase can also be interpreted as meaning that you should keep alert to the circumstances around you. It does not take a major genius to see that American civilization is declining rapidly in this day. Yet our particular church congregation, like many others in the emerging church movement, does not consider this a subject fit either for sermons or prayer. Christians of this time were much more aware of the fact that persecution was not just a possibility, but a likelihood. Therefore they were to be wise and keep alert.

Thankful

There is no substitute for “an attitude of gratitude.” The reason most of us don’t have such an attitude is that we are firm believers in the idea that we are entitled to something. Sometimes this is relatively innocent; we see somebody else with a new car and think, “why can’t I have one of those?” The problem here is that we start with the idea that we’re entitled to what everybody else has. The Christian starting point is, in all honesty, the idea that he is entitled to nothing. You’re a sinner; why should God do anything for you? The answer has nothing to do with your merits, or the geography where you were born, but has everything to do with his love for you.

Another reason that this thankful attitude isn’t very common today is our view of the water glass. Some of us view it as half-full; some of us view it as half empty. As one sober, scientific fellow pointed out the glass is always full. It’s half full of water and half full of air. We should be thankful for the water we have and the air we breathe; we should therefore also be thankful for the blessings in our life, and for those things which God has withheld from us for our own good.

Spread of the Gospel

Paul begins with a prayer request here: that he will be able to spread the gospel as he should. Please note: Paul’s in jail. Most of us view that as an excuse not to be an evangelist. After all, doesn’t Billy Graham work in a great big auditorium? There are three things about which we can pray for the spread of the gospel at practically any time:

- ✚ First, as our Lord said, that he should send workers out to the harvest.
- ✚ Second, as Paul puts it here, but God will clear some of the obstacles to evangelism out of the way — to open the door.
- ✚ Finally, he prays that his own work will not be blemished by any fault on his part. He wants to do what he ought to do — and asks for prayer in that regard.

Outsiders

Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, *as though* seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.

(Colossians 4:5-6)

Wisdom

The word “wisdom” is seldom used today. The ancient Greeks clearly separated the concept of knowledge from the concept of wisdom. To put it in the simplest form, wisdom is composed of imperatives: words that tell you when you ought to do something. Knowledge is composed of indicatives: when you do something, this is what will happen. Both of these items are necessary for

human conduct, but by placing our modern emphasis on knowledge over wisdom we have missed the moral imperative. Such an idea would've been completely foreign to St. Paul.

Wisdom is not the same as a cynical, all-knowing view. You'll recall that our Lord commanded us to be innocent as doves and shrewd as snakes⁷. We might define it as knowing the right thing to do, and being persuaded we ought to do it. Knowledge, on the other hand, tells us how to do it. But wisdom must come first; if your method of bringing people to Christ was taken from PT Barnum you probably have a problem.

For most of us this concept seems a bit strange. We think of wisdom is something that belongs to some guru sitting on a mountaintop. The Scripture, however, tells us that we may apply for wisdom and that God will grant it⁸. The trick is to apply for it before you need it, rather than after you think to yourself, "I should have said..."

Make the Most

If you ask the average preacher to talk about stewardship, you get a sermon on the subject of money. Certainly there is no lack of teaching in the New Testament on the subject of money; Christ mentions it often. But, I submit, there is also a stewardship of time. We are to "redeem the time, because the days are evil."⁹ The principles by which we steward our money can be applied to time as well; it's just that it can't be saved up. But each of us should be asking ourselves whether or not what we do is the best use of our time.

The most difficult concept to get across to most questions in this is that we don't have an infinite amount of time in this life. Our days are numbered; God knows how long we're going to live. The question is what we're going to do with the time we have. We very often fall into the trap of thinking we have all the time we need; life is so long. Eternal life is so long, but this life is not. Therefore, we should make the most of every hour we have. This lesson is far too short to go into the details of this, but you should examine the problem yourself.

Seasoned with Salt

The word "salt" has a detailed history, and it would've meant much more to them than it does to us. We may take it simply, however, that we are to be (to use Christ's exquisite phrase) "the salt of the earth." The fact that we still use this expression today to describe people gives us a pretty good feeling for how it's supposed to be used. We are to avoid the extremes of being extremely technical in our Christianity (turn with me to Second Hezekiah) or being completely ignorant of what we really believe. We should know we're talking about, and be able to put it plainly, without prejudice, for the benefit of those here.

⁷ Matthew 10:16

⁸ James 1:5

⁹ Ephesians 5:16, King James Version

It's very hard to practice that as an act. So you're going to have to do with the natural way; that salt of the earth attitude has to come from the heart. But it must be informed as well, so that you may deal with the objections of those were not Christians. As Peter puts it to us,

"...always *being* ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; " (First Peter 3:15)

This is the rationale behind studying apologetics. If you think that Christianity makes sense, you should be able to explain it to someone else in a way that makes sense to them too.

The hardened cynic is not going to be convinced, nor is the fellow who has his own position to defend. But there are a lot more people out there who just need to be told what the gospel says in a quiet way that makes such good sense. Have the knowledge to know what you're talking about, and the wisdom to deliver it as Christ would.