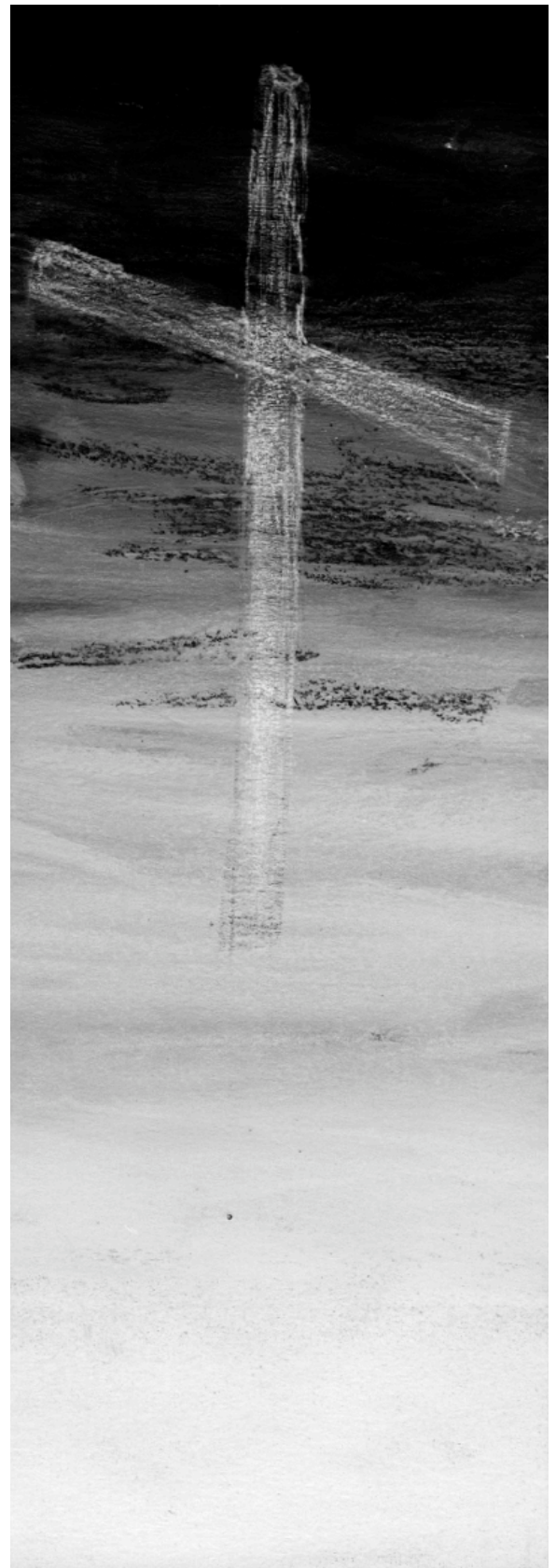


THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

*THAT IN EVERYTHING HE
MIGHT BE PREEMINENT. . .*

*STUDIES IN
COLOSSIANS*

*SANTA BARBARA
COMMUNITY CHURCH*



Winter / Spring Calendar

Teaching Date	Study	Text	Title
1/29	1	Colossians 1-4	The Big Picture
2/5	2	1:1-8	Life <i>In Christ</i>
2/12	3	1:9-14	Pleasing God
2/19	4	1:15-18	The Preeminence of Christ
2/26	5	1:19-23	The Grand Accomplishment
3/5	6	1:24-29	Joy in Sufferings
3/12	7	2:1-10	Christ the Center
3/19	8	2:11-19	Christ the Liberator
3/26	9	2:20—3:4	Habits of the Heart
4/2	10	3:5-14	Actions From the Heart
4/9	11	3:15—4:1	In the Name of Jesus
4/16			Easter
4/23			Retreat
4/30	12	4:2-18	Praying With Epaphras

The text of this study is a re-write and expansion of our Colossians study from 1994. Both studies were written by Reed Jolley. Thanks to Kim Tresser for proofing reading the text, and to Katiee Hering for providing the illustrations. All Scripture citations, including the text at the beginning of studies 2-12 are from the English Standard Version. May God bless Santa Barbara Community Church as we study his word!

SOURCES/ABBREVIATIONS

Barclay	William Barclay, <u>The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians</u> , Westminster, 1959
Bruce	F. F. Bruce and E.K. Simpson, <u>The Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians</u> , Eerdmans, 1957
ESV	English Standard Version
Hendrickson	William Hendrickson, <u>Philippians, Colossians and Philemon</u> , Baker, 1964
Hughes	R. Kent Hughes, <u>Colossians</u> , Crossway, 1989
KJV	King James Bible
Lightfoot	J. B. Lightfoot, <u>St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon</u> , Macmillan, 1879
Lucas	R. C. Lucas, <u>The Message of Colossians & Philemon</u> , IVP, 1980
Maclaren	Alexander Maclaren, <u>The Epistles of St. Paul to the Colossians and Philemon</u> , Hodder & Stoughton, n.d.
Martin	Ralph Martin, <u>Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon</u> , John Knox, 1991
Moule	C. F. D. Moule, <u>The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon</u> , Cambridge, 1957
Moule	H. C. G. Moule, <u>Colossian Studies</u> , Hodder & Stoughton, 1898
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
Patzia	Arthur G. Patzia, <u>Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon</u> , Hendrickson, 1984
Pokorny	Petr Pokorny, <u>Colossians, A Commentary</u> , Hendrickson, 1987
Wright	N. T. Wright, <u>Colossians and Philemon</u> , Eerdmans, 1986

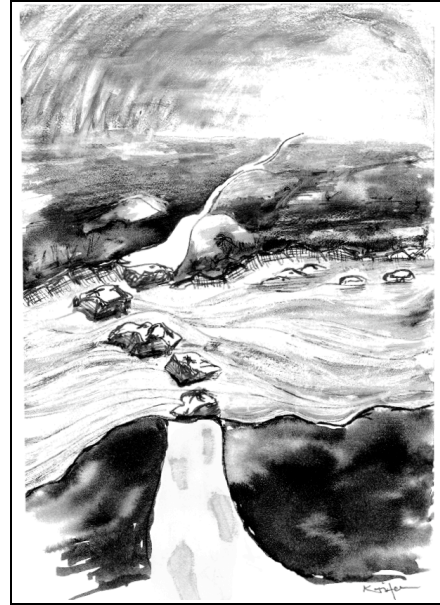
Study One

The Big Picture

Colossians 1—4

The apostle Paul is the missionary who wrote a lot of letters to churches he either founded or cared about deeply. Colossians is one such letter. In this case the apostle writes to a church he had neither founded nor visited. He writes from a prison cell to encourage a new congregation of believers to press on toward spiritual maturity.

Before reading on in this study guide, read Paul's letter to the Colossians. The letter is short (95 verses) and can be read aloud in about 12-15 minutes. Read, if possible, from a Bible without notes, and try to ignore the paragraph headings that the publisher has inserted at various points in the biblical text. Consider the following questions as you read:



1. Imagine you are one of the original listeners to the letter. You are in a church meeting in someone's living room and it is announced that the apostle Paul has sent a letter to your church. As you listen to the letter what emotions do you feel?

2. What compliments does Paul pay the church?

3. What is Paul's mood in the letter? Is he angry? Is he happy with the Colossian church? Concerned?

4. In the center of the letter (2:8—3:11) Paul expresses some particular concerns for the church. What are these concerns?
5. How would you broadly outline this letter?
6. What questions does your initial reading of Colossians provoke?
7. What is your favorite verse in Colossians?
8. As a church we will spend 10 weeks studying these 4 chapters. At the outset, what lesson or lessons do you think we will learn from this study? Where do you think the letter will speak to us as a church at the beginning of the 21st century?

Introduction to Colossians:

The Colossian church was a *mishmash* collection of people. In the same congregation there were Jews, Greeks, orthodox and the not-so-orthodox. The church consisted of Hellenized Jews (Jews influenced by the ways of the Greeks) and Gentiles who resided in the Lycus Valley in the area of Phrygia (modern day Turkey). This body of believers, most likely founded by Epaphras, a co-worker with Paul, was not in a desperate situation when Paul wrote his letter. The apostle is able to commend the church for her *faith in Christ* (2:5), and for the love she exhibited toward *all the saints* (1:4). But along with the sublime aspects of the church, there were some foreboding storm clouds hanging over this community of believers. These clouds were only drizzling when Paul wrote, but he seemed to sense they were ready to burst and thus drench the fellowship with the errant thinking of the day.

It is to this end that Paul writes. He wants to make Jesus the center of the Colossian church. There is an irony in the letter itself. The church of Colossae was undoubtedly the least significant church to which Paul wrote. The city of Colossae had seen better days. Situated between Laodicea (ten miles to the east) and Hierapolis (16 miles southeast) this city was diminishing economically and politically. The area was known for its earthquakes and Colossae was devastated by such a quake in 61 A.D. The town was never rebuilt.

How ironic, therefore, that Paul would write a letter from his prison cell in Rome¹ to such an insignificant destination. His letter to an almost forgotten church in the Lycus Valley contains some of the loftiest statements about the person and the work of Jesus found in the New Testament. One could spend a lifetime probing the meaning and the implications of Paul's affirmations about Jesus.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. (1:15-18)

As far as we know, Paul never visited the church of Colossae. Perhaps he received the news by letter that there was trouble in the church from his friend Epaphras. Colossians, while warm and embracing, shows a picture of concern. Paul addresses what commentators on the book have called *The Colossian Heresy*. As F. F. Bruce puts it, *Basically the heresy was Jewish*.

This seems obvious from the part played in it by legal ordinances, circumcision, food regulations, the Sabbath, new moon and other prescriptions of the Jewish calendar—things which once had their place as “a shadow of the things to come” but had lost their validity now that Christ, the reality which they foreshadowed, had come and fulfilled their significance (Ch. 2:16 f.). (Bruce, p. 166)

But it was not the kind of Jewish heresy that afflicted the church in Galatia. There the issue was one of strict legalism. This church is threatened, apparently, by a heavily Greek influenced Judaism. While the letter itself contains no specific description of the heresy, we can infer the following elements:

1. A misunderstanding of Jesus. The church appears to have been confused as to the creative work of Christ (1:16), the relation of Jesus to the created order (1:15), the divinity of Jesus (2:9) and the humanity of Jesus (1:22).
2. The incorporation of Greek philosophy into the Christian faith. Today we call this philosophy Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means

¹ It is by no means certain that Paul wrote from Rome. It is highly possible that this letter was penned from Ephesus, a city a mere 100 miles from Colossae as many Bible scholars contend.

knowledge) was not a clearly defined *ism* in the first century. There is much debate as to what *Gnosticism* was and when it threatened the early church¹. We might call Gnosticism the first century equivalent of what we call the New Age movement. Gnosticism contained the following elements:

A. A *low* view of the world. The universe in Gnostic writings² is not the result of God's creative handiwork. The physical world is the product of evil. In Gnosticism the spirit world is good and the physical world is evil. But good and evil, spirit and matter are co-eternal and at odds with each other. The true, unknowable God, could never interact with the physical world. So God *put out a series of emanations, each of which was a little more distant from God until at the end of the series there was an emanation so distant that it could handle matter; and it was this emanation which created the world*³. (Barclay, p. 97)

B. A faulty view of man's need before God. In the end Gnosticism teaches that men and women are really no different from God. They have no real *sin* for which they need to be forgiven. *Salvation* is the ascent of the soul from the physical world to the spiritual world, from earth to heaven. Gnosticism, therefore, sees enlightenment, or some special insight (knowledge) as the path to salvation. One is saved when he realizes he is part of the divine. Self-knowledge in the path to enlightenment. Birger A. Pearson remarks, *The Gnostic . . . though divine, must also become divine by the event of saving Gnosis . . . self-knowledge*.⁴

C. A faulty view of God. God is not a specific being with whom we can communicate, to whom we may pay homage and from whom we can receive love, discipline and instruction. God is, strictly speaking, *unknowable, without personality, and untouched by the world. God is but the ground of existence and is only known by the divine spark in mankind*.⁵ (Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back*, pp. 28-29)

D. Ethical chaos. If God is the ground of all being, if we are a part of God and if the physical world is bad, then ethics (our view of right and wrong) are very subjective. There is no *God* who has made his will known (does this sound familiar in our time?).

3. The incorporation of Jewish legalism into the Christian faith. Colossae had not gone as far as the Galatian church. There the church was tolerating and

¹Some scholars would say that Gnosticism began to threaten the early church in the second century.

² In 1948 forty-seven Gnostic documents from the area of Nag Hammadi, Egypt were discovered. It is from these documents that we find the theology of Gnosticism.

³ One scholar says, *Creation is interpreted in all the Gnostic texts as an act of unspeakable pride (hubris) on the part of the Demiurge (the name for the god who finally created)*. (Orval Wintermute, "Gnostic Exegesis of the Old Testament," in J. M. Efrid, ed., The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays, p. 257.

⁴*Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, 1990, p. 133.

⁵ *Peter Jones, The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back*, 1992, pp. 28-29.

considering the notion that one had to be circumcised in order to be saved! Paul, in his Galatian letter is aghast and says the church might as well forget about Jesus and go back to pure Judaism. In Colossae the legalistic heresy was much more subtle. Paul encourages the church to give up its submission to legalism:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" (referring to things that all perish as they are used)--according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.(2:20-23)

4. Somehow the church had an antinomian (literally, *lawless*) attitude about sin and how it applied to the Christian faith (see 3:5-11).

What a great privilege to study Paul's brief letter to the Colossian church. Here we find an unrivaled portrait of our Lord. John Calvin, the sixteenth century champion of the Protestant Reformation, captured the value and message of the letter in his commentary on Colossians.

[Paul] teaches that all parts of our salvation are to be found in Christ alone, that they [the Colossians] may not seek anything elsewhere; and he puts them in mind that it was in Christ that they had obtained every blessing that they possessed, in order that they might the more carefully make it their aim to hold Him fast to the end. And indeed even this one article would be perfectly sufficient of itself to make us reckon this epistle, short as it is, to be an inestimable treasure. For what is of greater importance in the whole system of heavenly doctrine than to have Christ drawn to the life, so that we may clearly contemplate His excellence, His office, and all the fruits that accrue to us therefrom? (from Bruce, p. 161)

Let us enjoy, as a church, contemplating *His excellence, His office, and all the fruits that accrue to us therefrom!*

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Two

Life *In Christ*

Colossians 1:1-8

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. 3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, 7 just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf 8 and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.



Think about the preposition *in*. What does it denote? One can be *in* trouble. Or *in* the army. We can be on the *inside* of a discussion, or *in* a hot debate. Surfers like to ride *in* the tube while senators live *inside* the beltway. *In* is a preposition of location. The root meaning of the Greek preposition is *within*. One of Paul's favorite descriptions of the Christian life is that of a life lived *in Christ*. What does this mean for our discipleship?

1:1-2 These verses are somewhat typical for an introduction to one of Paul's letters. The apostle generally begins with a self introduction (claiming to be an *apostle* of Jesus, that is, one who is sent on a mission) and a brief description of those to whom he is writing.

Here he calls the Colossians *the saints and faithful brothers*. The word *saint* (rendered in the NIV renders as *holy*) is *hagioi* in Greek. Paul is not describing the quality of life of the Colossians. He is pointing to their state in Christ. Paul frequently refers to all believers as *saints* or *holy ones* (see 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; etc.). As we work through this letter we will find Paul repeatedly pointing to the state of the Colossians, to their standing in Christ. He will then call them to live up to their standing.

Notice where the Colossians stand. They are the *faithful* and the *holy ones* in Christ.

As stated above, the words *in Christ* are among Paul's favorites to describe a person's new life as a believer. These two words (*en christo*, εν χριστω¹) are found in eighty-four verses of Paul's writings.²

What do they mean? What is Paul getting at when he says the believer is *in Christ*?

Consider the following verses as you ponder the question:

Romans 8:1-2 *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.*

1 Corinthians 1:2 *To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.*

2 Corinthians 2:17-19 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*

Ephesians 1:13-14 *In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.*

If we took the time to read every reference to being *in Christ* from Paul's letters we might surmise this idea to be the central principle of our salvation. We are

- chosen *in Christ* (Eph. 1:4)
- foreordained *in Christ* (Eph. 1:7)
- redeemed and sanctified *in Christ* (Rom. 3:24, 1 Cor. 1:2)

¹ The Greek preposition Paul chooses is significant. He uses *en* as opposed *eis*. The former denotes a sphere rather than an object. Paul is saying our faith is in *the sphere of Christ* in these cases. F. F. Bruce explains, '*Christ Jesus*' appears here to be viewed not so much as the object of their faith as the living environment within which their faith is exercised; that is to say, the faith of which the apostle speaks is the faith which they have as men and women who are 'in Christ Jesus.' (Bruce, p. 180)

² The words *in Christ* occur 164 times in Paul's letters. Interestingly, there are only four other uses of these words in the New Testament, one from the book of Hebrews and three from the letters of Peter.

- reconciled to God *in Christ* (1 Cor. 5:19)
- justified *in Christ* (Gal. 2:17)
- given access to God *in Christ* (Eph. 2:12).

Paul goes so far as to say that all of life is lived *in Christ* (1 Corinthians 4:17).¹

George Ladd probes the meaning of being *in Christ* in Paul's thinking:

Paul conceives of two races of men. Natural men are in Adam; renewed men are in Christ. As Adam is the head and representative of the old race, so Christ is the head and representative of the new humanity. In Adam came sin, disobedience, condemnation and death; in Christ comes righteousness, obedience, acquittal, and life (Rom. 5:12ff.). Those who are in Adam belong to the old aeon with its bondage to sin and death; those who belong to Christ belong to the new aeon with its freedom and life.²

Notice how soon Paul returns to this idea. In verses 4 and 5 Paul refers to three graces in the life of a believer, faith, hope and love. Our *faith* is, again, *in Christ*.

Think about what it means to be *in Christ*. What does this biblical teaching mean to you? What should it mean?

Catacomb is a term used to describe subterranean Christian burial grounds which go back as far as the first century A.D. These places of burial are somewhat mysterious. It is thought that the burial area provided believers a refuge from persecution because such areas were regarded as sacrosanct. Hence, during times of Roman persecution, worship services would be held, literally, underground. Archaeologists tell us that many of the small tombs carried the simple inscription, *In Christ*. The same tomb would sometimes have the words *In Peace*. The newness of life in Christ cast its light even over death in the early church.

If someone looked at your life, (your attitudes, your response to difficulties along life's way, your attraction to money and material things), what would lead them to say, *In Christ*? Don't be bashful here. What are the components of your life that testify to your living *in Christ*?

¹ cf. George Ladd, A Theology of the New Testament, 1974, p. 482.

² Ibid.

Is Christ the sphere, the environment in which you live life? If you hesitate to say yes to this question, what changes could you make in your life to remedy the hesitancy? Which of these changes are primarily outward? Which are inward changes? If we watched a short, soundless video of a person *in Christ*, and another person who was not *in Christ* what would the differences be between the two?

1:3-5 Paul here refers to *faith, hope and love* as characteristics of those who are *in Christ*. Paul puts these three dimensions of the Christian life together often in his writing (see Romans 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 13:13; Galatians 5:5-6; Ephesians 1:15-18; 4:2-5; 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8).

Discuss each of these Christian virtues.

What is biblical *faith*?

- Romans 4:24
- Romans 10:9-10
- Hebrews 11:1-2

What kind of *love* for the saints is Paul talking about?

- 1 Corinthians 13

What is Christian *hope*?

- 2 Timothy 4:8 (compare this with Colossians 1:5.)
- 1 Peter 1:3-4

How have the above verses shaped or re-shaped your understanding of faith, love and hope?

Explain how each of these is manifest in your life?

What examples of faith, love and hope have you observed in the people of your homegroup? Go ahead, take a minute and affirm someone in your group.

Notice how Paul ties faith and love to the *hope* of the believer. In other words, our convictions (faith) and our affections (love) spring forth from our *hope*, that is, from our understanding of the future. Jesus is coming again! We have every reason to live a life of faith in Him and love those who are His children! Let's do it!

Spend time praying for one another to increase in faith, love and hope.

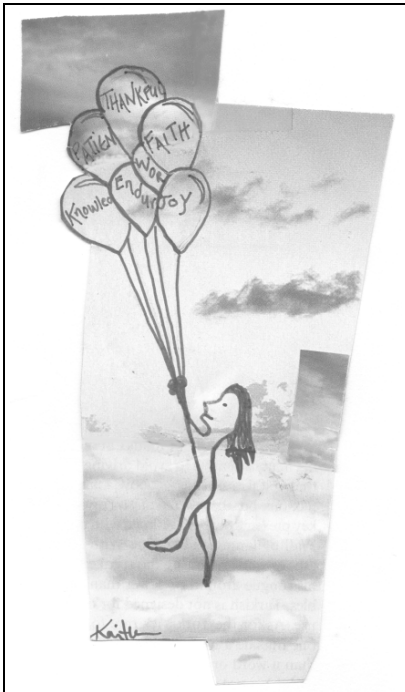
Sermon Notes. . .

Study Three

Pleasing God

Colossians 1:9-14

9 And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. 11 May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. 13 He has delivered 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.



If you were asked what was the primary purpose of your life, what would you say? Health? Pleasure? Leisure? A good marriage? Children that become productive citizens?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (1634) consists of a series of questions and answers which were intended to teach the Christian faith to people in the church. It begins with a profound answer regarding the purpose of one's life.

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Paul begins his letter to the Colossian church in much the same way. The pattern of the believer's life is to be one *that pleases God in every way* (1:10 NIV).

Thus far we have looked at Colossians as a whole and have come to a preliminary understanding of the way in which Paul viewed the people of the Colossian church: they were *in Christ*. At this point the book will become *thicker*, in its content (and *thicker* still next week). The Apostle begins to probe the meaning of being *in Christ* and his Holy Spirit inspired thoughts are profound to say the least.

Read these six verses a few times before going on with this study guide (compare translations). How would you outline these verses? Draw a diagram of Paul's train of thought (no peeking at the next page).

Notice how different Paul's prayer is for the people of Colossae when compared with our prayers for one another. We tend to pray for healing, for jobs, for the preservation of marriages, for God to send a spouse to someone who wants to be married, etc. In other words, our intercessory prayers are usually for *things*. How does Paul's prayer differ?

Notice how this is a familiar habit of Paul's:

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Ephesians 1:16-21

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

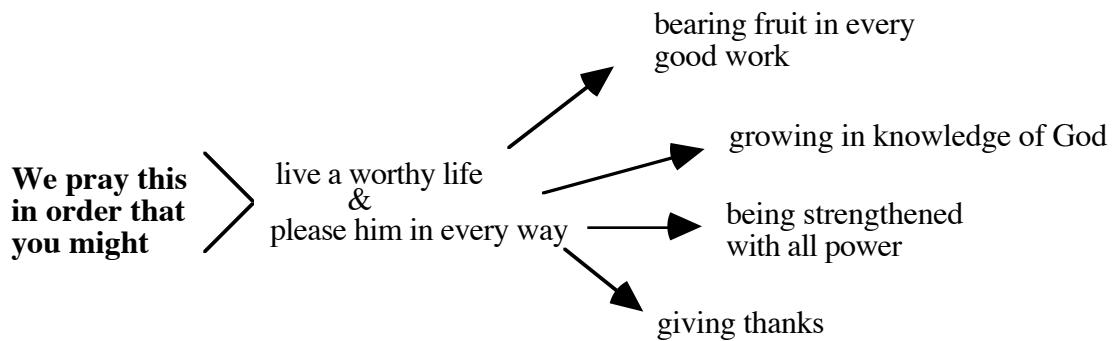
Philemon 4-6

Should we be in the habit of praying for one another in this manner? Are we capable of such prayers? Are these things as important as getting a good grade on next Thursday's final? As finding a decently priced *used* car? As praying for someone's health in your homegroup?

Sometime during your group meeting take time to use these prayers as the basis for your prayers for one another. Wouldn't it be a wonderful practice to make a habit of praying like this?

What would help us develop a habit of praying prayers such as these for one another?

The Greeks did not really know what a sentence was. Greek literature tended to contain thoughts that ran together. Paul was a world-class champion of the run-on sentence. He would have failed a basic writing class at Santa Barbara City College. Our text this week is no exception to Paul's style. He tells the Colossians he and Timothy are praying for them. From that point one thought leads to another. Nevertheless we can make sense of the content of Paul's prayer with the following diagram (each of the four areas on the right are participles in the Greek New Testament and are certainly some of the elements in a life which is lived to *please God in every way*).



This chart skips over the great irony of Paul's prayer. He is writing to Christians seduced by *Gnosticism* (special knowledge) and he tells them he is praying for them to receive *knowledge*. The antidote to false knowledge is true knowledge of God.

1:9 Though Greek scholars debate the point, it is probably significant that Paul employs a different word for knowledge than the Gnostics used. Gnosticism was captured by the word *gnosis*. Paul uses a word never found in Greek literature outside the New Testament, *epignosis*. Scholars debate the meaning of this unique word. It seems to be knowledge with moral and religious overtones. Not simple knowledge, but knowledge with a purpose. One commentator says it is knowledge *which grasps and penetrates its object*. Another scholar, J. B. Lightfoot, says *epignosis is used especially of the knowledge of God and of Christ, as being the perfection of knowledge*. Lightfoot adds that in Paul's mind *the end of all knowledge. . . is conduct*. (Lightfoot, pp. 138-139)

What would it mean for the Colossians (and for you) to be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding? Is this something which takes place in us supernaturally? Does God make this happen? Or would God have us use our minds to acquire such knowledge? Read Psalm 1 in this regard. How does *the blessed man/woman* gain spiritual wisdom?

What responsibility do you have to be *filled with the knowledge of his will*? What steps are you taking to see that this takes place?

Harry Blamires is a British thinker concerned about the lack of thinking in the contemporary church. Respond to the following statement while placing it in context of Colossians 1:9:

. . . the Christian mind—a mind trained, informed, equipped to handle data of secular controversy within a framework of reference which is constructed of Christian presuppositions. The Christian mind is the prerequisite of Christian thinking. And Christian thinking is the prerequisite of Christian action. (*The Christian Mind*, p. 43)¹

1:10 Here Paul gets to the heart of our section of Colossians. He points out that our goal should be *fully pleasing* to God. Again, Paul's choice of words is fascinating. In Classical Greek literature the word Paul chooses had bad connotations. H. C. G. Moule observes,

[The word] denotes a cringing and subservient habit, ready to do anything to please a patron; not only to meet but to anticipate his most trivial wishes. But when transferred to . . . the believer's relation to his Lord, the word at once rises by its associations. *To do anything* to meet, to anticipate His wishes is not only the most absolutely right thing we could do, it is His eternal due; it is at the same time the surest path to our own highest development and gain. (Moule, p. 49, emphasis Moule's)²

How is your life being lived to *fully please* God (hint: look at the chart on the previous page)?

If you decided the whole of Christianity was a ruse, that God didn't even exist, how would your life change? How would your time be spent differently? How about your money? In what ways would your work change?

¹ Accordingly Moule warns, *Beware of an 'un-theological' devotion to Christ*. (Moule, pp. 55-56)

² Later Moule adds, *We are meant, in light of this transfigured word, areskeia, to think of His will as an affectionate servant thinks of the wishes (not merely of the spoken or written-down orders) of the master, or the mistress, who has made the house of service a genuine home, and has almost hidden authority away in friendship*. (Moule, p. 60)

Look up the following verses to help in your understanding of Colossians 1:10-12. What does it mean to be a person who is:

1:10 *bearing fruit in every good work*

- Galatians 5:22-26
- Ephesians 2:10
- Titus 1:16; 2:7, 14; 3:8, 14

1:10 *increasing in the knowledge of God.*

- 2 Corinthians 10:15
- Ephesians 4:15
- 2 Thessalonians 1:3
- 1 Peter 2:2
- 2 Peter 3:18

1:11 *be strengthened with all power*

- 1 Corinthians 1:8
- 2 Corinthians 12:10
- Ephesians 6:10
- Philippians 4:13
- 1 Timothy 1:2

- 1 Peter 4:11

1:12 *giving thanks to the Father*

- Colossians 3:15
- Hebrews 12:28

Which of the above verses surprise you? Does it sound strange to be commanded to *be thankful*?

1:13 is a succinct condensation of the message of the New Testament. Here the work of Jesus on the cross is understood in terms of its kingdom dimensions. Jesus has rescued us from one realm of authority and transferred us to another. The NIV reads:

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness

The word translated *dominion* is literally *authority*. We have been set free from the authority of darkness.¹

In the work of Christ, the kingdom (that is, the authority, the rule, the reign) of God has arrived. This kingdom will be territorial in the future (cf. Matthew 24; Mark 13; 2 Timothy 4:1; Revelation 20:1-6 etc.) but it is already manifest in the present reality of the Lordship of Jesus! (cf. Galatians 1:4; Luke 4:16-21; 11:20). This message of the kingdom of God was the basis of Paul's (and the other Apostles') preaching. Consider the following:

Acts 8:12 *But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*

Acts 19:8 *And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.*

¹ Compare the way the same phrase is used in Luke 22:53. In the NIV *darkness reigns* is used to translate the same words.

Acts 28:23 *When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.*

Acts 28:31 *[Paul was] proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Four

The Preeminence of Christ

Colossians 1:15-18

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.



Preeminence. The word has a nice ring to it. Older English translations of Colossians used the word to translate verse 18 of chapter one, *that in all things He might have preeminence*. The ESV employs a similar literal translation.

And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

The word comes from the Latin word *praeeminens*, which means *to project forward*. In English the word means prominent, surpassing, eminent.

The translation is a good one in light of the Colossian heresy. The Gnostics taught that Jesus was something other than the supreme ruler/creator of the universe. *At best he was only one of many spirit beings who bridged the space between God and men.* (Vaughan, p. 180) Against such teaching we find these four verses which boldly proclaim otherwise. Christ is the preeminent Lord of the Universe!

E. F. Scott said of this section of Colossians, *[It] represents a loftier conception of Christ's person than is found anywhere else in the writings of Paul*¹.

Moule comments on the grandeur of these verses:

¹ *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, p. 20.

Can we read it, and not feel that it flows and moves with a personal “joy in believing”? He [Paul] is not only discoursing, still less discussing; he is worshipping. Upon his own heart this Lord Jesus Christ is rising and shining, in all His majesty, and mercy, and necessity, and infinitely fair beauty. (Moule, p. 73)¹

Take time to read and ponder these verses before going on in this study. We could spend weeks studying these verses as a church congregation. Read and meditate upon these succinct words. Compare translations. Worship!

Add the following extended translation/paraphrase to your reading list:²

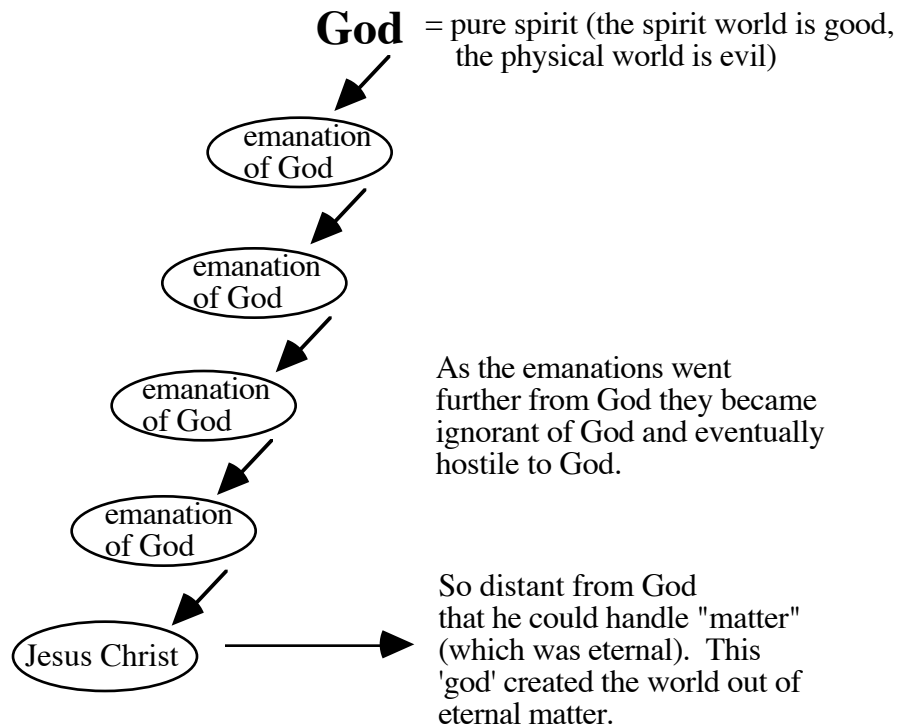
He is the perfect image, the visible representation, of the unseen God. He is the First-born, the absolute Heir of the Father, begotten before the ages; the Lord of the Universe by virtue of primogeniture, and by virtue also of creative agency. For in and through Him the whole world was created, things in heaven and things on earth, things visible to the outward eye and things cognisable by the inward perception. His supremacy is absolute and universal. All powers in heaven and earth are subject to Him. The subjection extends even to the most exalted and most potent of angelic beings, whether they be called Thrones or Dominations or Princedoms or Powers, or whatever title of dignity men may confer upon them. Yes: He is first and He is last. Through Him, as the mediatorial Word, the universe has been created; and unto Him as the final goal, it is tending. In Him is no before or after. He is pre-existent and self-existent before all the worlds. And in Him, as the binding and sustaining power, universal nature coheres and consists. And not only does He hold this position of absolute priority and sovereignty over the Universe - the natural creation. He stands also in the same relation to the Church - the new spiritual creation. He is its head, and it is His body. This is His prerogative, because He is the source and the beginning of its life, being the First-born from the dead. Thus in all things - in the spiritual order as in the natural - in the Church as in the World - He is found to have the pre-eminence. (Lightfoot, pp. 144, 156)

¹ Many scholars suppose that Paul is actually quoting an early Christian hymn (praise song) in these verses.

² This is the product of J. B. Lightfoot. Lightfoot (1828-1889) was a scholar's scholar. He had a teaching career at Trinity College, Cambridge and was eventually appointed bishop of Durham. His commentaries on Paul's letters still keep company with the best works available.

As we look at Paul's presentation of Christ, let's review the basic Gnostic teaching with regard to God and Jesus:¹

God's Relation to Jesus Christ in Gnostic Teaching



Therefore, according to Gnostic teaching, Jesus was,

1. Not the God of the universe in a human body. He was merely another emanation of God.
2. Without a real physical body (since matter was evil, an emanation of God could not be material).

In four short verses Paul challenges all of this and more! He presents Jesus, the Christ as supreme, preeminent in relation to deity, to the created world and in relation to the church.

1. Preeminent in relation to deity (vs. 15).

Paul calls Jesus the *image* or icon, (εἰκὼν) of the invisible God. The word refers to the likeness of Jesus to God himself. Lightfoot notes that the word carries at least two ideas.

¹ The following chart is based, loosely, on material from Barclay, p. 114.

First, Jesus is the representation of what God is like. Paul could have used a different Greek word which would signify an accidental representation (one egg is like another). But in using this word Paul is saying that Jesus is a *copy* of God himself.

Second, the word carries the idea of being the manifestation of God. (cf. Lightfoot, p. 145).

The Greeks used a term to describe their philosophical quest. The term was *logos*. By *logos* they meant the word, or the reason of God. The *logos* was the first principle of philosophy. In time they developed elaborate theories about this *logos*. The Gnostics held that the *logos* created the world, maintained the universe, gave order to life.¹ What is interesting for our purposes is to note that Greek philosophers used the word *image* (εἰκων) to refer to the *logos* of God.² Barclay comments,

It is as if Paul said to the Greeks: "For the last six hundred years you have dreamed and thought and written about the reason, the mind, the word, the *Logos* of God; you called it God's *eikon*; in Jesus Christ that *Logos* has come plain for all to see. Your dreams and philosophies are all come true in him." (Barclay, p. 117)

Think about this verse with regard to your own life. God who is invisible has made his *image* known by becoming a person. How does this help you relate to God?

When Paul says Jesus is the *firstborn* over all creation he is not implying that there was a time when Jesus came into existence.³ The word is used here and elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. Colossians 1:18; Romans 8:29; Hebrews 1:6 etc.) to denote supremacy in rank. *Firstborn* means first in terms of priority. Jesus is *higher* than his creation.

¹ cf. Barclay p. 116 ff.

² Philo writes, for example, *He calls the invisible and divine Logos, which only the mind can perceive, the image (eikon) of God.* (cited in Barclay, p. 117)

³ This was the mistake of Arius, a well-known third century heretic, who said, *There was once when He was not.* The church condemned his teaching at the council of Nicea in 325 A.D.

2. Preeminent in relation to creation (vs. 16-17)

Look at verse 16 and 17. Underline the prepositions used (to, for, with, by) to describe the relation of Jesus to the created world.

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

- Who created the universe?
- Why was the universe created?

Does Paul's answer to the why question surprise you? Does it seem selfish that Jesus would direct all creation toward himself? Moule writes of these verses,

He who is their Creator is also their Goal. Their whole being, willingly or unwillingly, moves that way - to Him; whether, as His blissful servants, they shall be as it were His throne; or, as His stricken enemies. (Moule, p. 78)

Note the practical implications of this teaching. If Jesus is both creator and the goal of creation, our lives have direction. We have a basic understanding of who we are. We are His children and His creatures. If Jesus is the goal of everything and the purpose of creation is the glory of Jesus, then we have ultimate direction in life. Meaning in life and purpose for life are found in this great affirmation!

Paul put it a bit differently in Romans 11:36. There he writes,

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

How is your life lived with regard to this marvelous truth? Are you working, studying, raising children to the glory of God? Share with your group the impact of these verses in your life. Hughes writes of these verses, *Since this is true, we should live completely for him. Any other course is completely irrational for the believer.* (Hughes, p. 32) Are you living *irrationally*?

3. Preeminent in relation to the church (vs. 18)

F. F. Bruce writes of this verse,

This Christ . . . “is the head of the body, the church.” Christ and His people, that is to say, are viewed together as a living unit; Christ is the head, exercising control and direction; believers are His body, individually His limbs and organs, under His control, obeying His direction, performing His work. And the life which animates the whole is Christ’s risen life, which He shares with His people. (Bruce, p. 201)

Can you think of the practical ramifications of the preeminence of Christ over the church with regard to the life of the church? How does Christ’s supremacy affect the life of the church? What difference does this teaching make during Sunday worship or in your homegroup?

When Paul writes that Jesus is the *firstborn from among the dead*, he is referring to the promised resurrection of all believers (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:20-23). In Christ the power of death was broken. His resurrection is the guarantee of the resurrection of all believers.

How has your understanding of Christ been informed from this section of Colossians? Consider the following by Kent Hughes,

What a stunning revelation this is! It is meant to stretch our puny minds and dominate our thinking and change us. (Hughes, p. 33)

How has your *puny* mind been dominated with thoughts of the sublime Christ who created all things?

Spend time adoring Christ as a group.

Study Five

The Grand Accomplishment

Colossians 1:19-23

19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. 21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, 23 if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

So begins Isaac Watt's hymn, written in 1701, about the surpassing value of the cross of Christ. Matthew Arnold called Watt's hymn *the greatest* written in the English language!



Why is the cross so *wondrous*? What would the Christian faith be without the cross of Christ? What was accomplished on this instrument of death?

In last week's study we pondered the preeminence of Christ. Paul is nowhere near done with this concept. After his bold and all-encompassing affirmation of Christ (1:15-18), Paul moves on to explain the reasons for his convictions. We might outline our verses as follows:

1. Preeminence because of Christ's fullness (1:19).
2. Preeminence because of Christ's accomplishment (1:20-23).

Read these verses in as many translations as you have available. Before going on in this study, answer the following questions:

What is Paul saying about Jesus?

How would you summarize the work of Jesus from these verses alone?

1. Preeminence because of Christ's fullness (1:19).

The word *fullness* is loaded with controversy and significance. Commentators and interpreters of Paul have a field day wrestling with this word. J. B. Lightfoot devotes sixteen pages of his commentary to this single word! Another commentator, E. F. Scott, calls the word *perhaps the most difficult* word in Colossians. Is Paul here ascribing deity to Jesus (most interpreters) or simply ascribing *the fullness of righteousness, wisdom, power, and every blessing* (Calvin and other commentators)?

Our word *fullness* comes from the Greek work *pleroma* (πλερωμα). As a verb it has two meanings, *to fill*, or *to complete*. The word is found seventeen times in the New Testament but only four of them use the word in the same sense as Paul does in Colossians 1:19. Read these. One of the best ways to understanding the meaning of a given word is to compare how it is used elsewhere in the New Testament. What insight do these cross references lend to the meaning of the word *pleroma*?

- Ephesians 1:23
- Ephesians 3:19
- Ephesians 4:13
- Colossians 2:9

The plot thickens when we realize that the Gnostics frequently employed the word *pleroma* to depict the totality of all the emanations (thousands of them) which stood between God and humankind (see the chart on p. 25). Here Paul uses this rather loaded term and applies it to Jesus. Paul asks, *Do you want to see the 'fullness' of God? Look no further than Jesus.*

Scholars and translators of 1:19 are exuberant when they paraphrase this word:

<i>God in all his fullness, or, all that God is</i>	C.F.D. Moule
<i>The full nature of God</i>	J. B. Phillips
<i>The totality of the divine powers</i>	J. B. Lightfoot ¹
<i>The full nature of God</i>	NEB

There is yet another interpretive issue in vs. 19. There is a question centering around the subject of the verb *pleased*. Literally the verse would read in Greek, *because in him was pleased all the fullness to dwell*. Some translators make Christ the subject, that is, Christ was pleased that God's fullness dwelled in him. Other translations personify *pleroma*. The fullness was pleased to dwell in Christ. The NIV and the NASB make God the Father the subject. God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. . .

Notice how the NIV and the NASB differ from the ESV:

NIV	<i>For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ]. . .</i>
NASB	<i>For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in [Christ]. . .</i>
ESV	<i>For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. . .</i>

2. Preeminence because of Christ's accomplishment (1:20-23).

Often we think of women and men as creatures who naturally seek God. We think it is part of our nature to be looking for God. Interestingly, the Scriptures teach virtually the opposite. In the Bible we find a picture painted of a hostile, repulsive war between sinful people and a loving God. Sin, the Scriptures teach, has so altered our minds, hearts and spirits, that we are pictured as beings who run from the presence of God. Think of the story of Adam and Eve. After they disobeyed God in the garden,

. . . the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Genesis 3:8

¹ Lightfoot points out the Gnostics *maintained that a single divine power, a fraction of the pleroma, resided in our Lord: the Apostle urges on the contrary, that the whole pleroma has its abode in Him.* (Lightfoot, p. 265)

To some extent we have been hiding ever since. We have every reason to hide! God, in his utter holiness, is angry with us due to our sin. Paul characterizes the sinful mind as one which is *hostile* to God (Romans 8:7). In our natural state we are called God's enemies (Romans 5:10) and people who are dead in transgressions (Ephesians 2:5).

The grand accomplishment of Jesus is that of reconciling two hostile parties. Consider again Paul's bold statement regarding the work of Jesus.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. . . (1:19-22)

The Greek word Paul uses which is translated *reconciled* is *katallassein*. It comes from a verb which means *to change*. *Katallassein* in secular Greek came to mean *exchanging any one thing for another*. (Barclay, New Testament Words, p. 165) In time the word was used, predominantly, for the change of enmity into friendship.

Here, and elsewhere, we find Paul borrowing this word to describe what Jesus did for us on the cross. He reconciled all things to himself!

As we think of reconciliation we should be careful to remember that it is men and women who are reconciled to God and not the other way around. Consider 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. Notice how Paul, three times, speaks of our need to be reconciled to God. He continues to be the loving Father. It was the cross which enabled us to return to the presence of God.

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Colossians 1:20 is so strong that some have taken from this verse the notion that all are saved in the work of Christ. After all, if *all things* are reconciled in the work of Christ, then certainly no one is still lost.

How do you see this? Do the Scriptures teach that everyone is really saved (maybe they just don't know it)? Think through the following verses as you work out your answer:

- Matthew 7:13-14
- Matthew 25:41-46
- Philippians 3:18-21
- 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10

William Hendrickson explains the extent of the reconciling work of Jesus:

The real meaning of Col. 1:20 is probably as follows: Sin ruined the universe. It destroyed the harmony between one creature and the other, also between all creatures and their God. Through *the blood of the cross* (cf. Eph. 2:11-18), however, sin, in principle, has been conquered. The demand of the law has been satisfied, its curse borne. (Rom. 3:25; Gal. 3:13). . . . *Through Christ and his cross the universe is brought back or restored to its proper relationship to God in the sense that as a just reward for his obedience Christ was exalted to the Father's right hand, from which position of authority and power he rules the entire universe in the interest of the church and to the glory of God.* (Hendrickson, pp. 81-82. emphasis Hendrickson's)

Do these ideas offend you? Ours is an era which exalts the individual. We place ourselves at the center of the universe and, to hear some Christian testimonies, sound like we are doing God a favor *if we accept him into our lives*. Paul, among other writers of the Bible, turns all of this around. We need a mediator to even approach God. What is your response to this?

Our tendency to an inflated sense of the self is nothing new. In the seventeenth century Lady Huntingdon invited a friend to hear the great revivalist George Whitefield preach. Her response, in spite of Whitefield's eloquent rhetoric, sounds like something which might be heard today if we invited a friend to consider Paul's letter to the Colossians.

. . . It is monstrous to be told, that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding. (A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, vol. 1, p. 132. cited in Hughes, p. 39)

Do you ever catch yourself claiming *high rank* and *good breeding* with regard to your relationship to God? Do you ever catch yourself thinking God might be impressed with you because you have a master's degree, or because you work at the Rescue Mission, or because you give faithfully to your church? What do these verses do with such notions?

How do Paul's words motivate you in your Christian life? God sees you as one without blemish, as one who is free from accusation (Colossians 1:22). What does this do to your tendency to feel guilty before God?

We began this study with several questions. How would you answer them now?

Why is the cross so *wondrous*? What would the Christian faith be without the cross of Christ? What was accomplished on this instrument of death?

Study Six

Joy and Suffering

Colossians 1:24-29

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, 25 of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.



27 To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

In our last study, we pondered Paul's affirmation of the supreme value of the cross of Christ. It is through the cross that God reconciled to himself *all things* (1:20).

The next paragraph of Paul's letter begins to probe the apostle's response to the work of God on the cross. This section is one of the few times we find Paul defending his own ministry. Paul, apparently, wants the Colossian church to understand his apostolic authority, and thus this paragraph.

Read and ponder these verses before going on in this study. Make sure you read them in the context of what comes before and after, that is, 1:21—2:5. These are truly startling verses that we don't often talk about in the American church. Jot down some initial reactions and questions this paragraph provokes.

Again, before going on in this study, read our paragraph again and look for the following:

- Why did Paul suffer?

- What was Paul's specific calling as an apostle?
- How does Paul define the content of the *mystery hidden for ages and generations* (1:26).
- How does Paul define the *glory* of this mystery (1:27)?

1:24 can be a perplexing verse. What does Paul mean when he says he *fills up* what is *lacking* with regard to the afflictions of Christ?

First, note the strength of Paul's language. Paul rejoices in his sufferings for the sake of the Colossians,¹ and then goes on to claim that his sufferings *fill up* what is lacking in *Christ's afflictions*.

What is Paul's meaning here? Some would claim that Paul is teaching that the suffering of Jesus on the cross was insufficient. Paul's sufferings (along with the suffering of other martyrs in the church) actually supplement the sufferings of Jesus. This view is to be rejected because the Scriptures are clear in teaching the finality of the death of Jesus (Hebrews 9:11-15, Romans 3:25-26 for example).

Paul is speaking of his sufferings for the church. Paul's suffering, along with the suffering of other Christians does not provide *salvation*, for that was accomplished in Christ, but *edification* of the body of Christ, the church. Had Paul not lived a life of suffering the church would not have been built up during this point of history and we would not have the letters he contributed to the New Testament.

Pastor John Piper helps clarify.

I think the context that we just looked at suggests that Paul's sufferings fill up Christ's not by adding anything to their worth, but by extending them to the people they were meant to bless. What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ is not that they are deficient in worth or merit, as though they could not sufficiently cover the sins of all who believe. What is lacking is that the infinite value of Christ's afflictions are not known in the world. They are still a mystery (hidden) to most peoples. And God's intention is that the mystery be revealed, extended to all the Gentiles. So the afflictions are lacking in the

¹ The NIV softens Paul's language rendering verse 1a, *Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you*.

sense that they are not seen and known among the nations. They must be carried by ministers of the word. And those ministers of the word fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ by extending them to others.¹

With this in mind, consider the following verses:

- 2 Corinthians 1:5
- Galatians 6:17

Notice the way in which the early church embraced suffering:

- Acts 5:41
- Philippians 1:29
- Philippians 3:10
- 2 Timothy 3:12
- 1 Peter 4:14

What do these verses, and the teachings of these verses mean to you? How do they challenge you to broaden your view of the suffering in your life?

Read and respond to the following:

. . . We would be wrong to think of suffering only in terms of the direct outward persecution that professing Christians sometimes undergo because of their faith. The church must, it is true, always be ready for such persecution, and must support, in prayer and practical help, those who face it. But all Christians will suffer for their faith in one way or another: if not outwardly, then inwardly, through the long, slow battle with temptation or sickness, the agonizing anxieties of Christian responsibilities for a family or a church . . . [and] the constant doubts and uncertainties which accompany the obedience of faith. . . All of these, properly understood, are things to rejoice in—not casually, flippantly or superficially, but because they are signs that the present age is passing

¹ Sermon by John Piper, August 30, 1992, Bethlehem Baptist Church.

away, that the people of Jesus, the Messiah, are the children of the new age, and that the birthpangs of this new age are being worked out in them. (Wright, p. 90)

1:26-28 ties Paul's sufferings to the proclamation of the *mystery* of the gospel, that is, the truth that God was to reconcile people to God and to one another through the cross of Christ (This is the dominant theme of Paul's letter to the Ephesians church, see especially Ephesians 3:1-13.). As Romanian pastor and mission leader Joseph Tson puts it, *Christ's cross was for propitiation; ours is for propagation.*

Think about your life and the lives of other Christians you know. Where have you found this to be true? What examples have you seen of God using the sufferings of his people to spread the gospel?

1:28 shows the goal of Paul's work. His desire is to present to the Lord mature disciples. The word *mature* (ESV), or *perfect* (NIV) means complete. It refers to something which is fulfilling its intended purpose. Paul was a disciple-maker. He labored to this end. A look at his life (2 Corinthians 11:21-33) reveals that he put up with tremendous discomfort, he lost his professional status as a rabbi and became something of a joke to his friends in graduate school. Nevertheless he pressed on in the task of disciple-making.

In what ways are you following Paul's example? Are you meeting with anyone in our church or outside of it simply to share what you know with regard to the Christian life? Paul gave up virtually everything and became a laughingstock in his response to Jesus' grand accomplishment. Can you give up an hour each week to care for someone in her/his walk with Christ? Does this sound too difficult? Too taxing? Consider the final verse in our chapter.

1:29 Paul *toils* to this end. The word can be translated *labor* (NIV) and refers to hard work. Paul couples this verb with another, *struggling*. The Greek is telling, *agonizomai*, from which we hear the word agony, or agonize. The verb was used of athletes who competed to win!

No one can successfully serve Jesus Christ without working hard. Lazy pastors, Christian leaders, or laymen will never fulfill the ministry the Lord has called them to. . . . Success in serving the Lord, like success in sports, demands maximum effort. (MacArthur, p. 81)

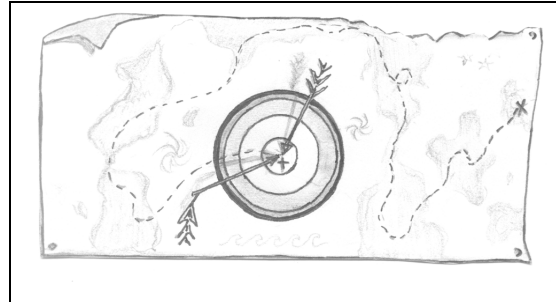
Spend time in your homegroup praying for one another with regard to suffering in the Christian life. Pray, specifically, that we will develop a biblical understanding of suffering, and that we will have the same *rejoicing* in our sufferings that Paul had in his.

Study Seven

Christ The Center

Colossians 2:1-10

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. 5 For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. 6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. 8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.



Before going on in this study read these ten verses from as many translations as you have available.

Keep the following outline in mind as you read:

1. Paul's concern (vss. 1-5)
 2. Paul's encouragement (vss. 6-7)
 3. Paul's warning (vss. 8-10)
- What stands out as you read these verses?
 - How does this section of the letter flow from what has preceded in chapter 1?

- Are there any verses which confuse you?
- What needs to be clarified?

1. Paul's concern (2:1-5)

What is it that makes you *tick*? What desires, concerns, or interests consume your thought-life? Where do your passions lie? What things cause you to lose sleep? What do you find yourself daydreaming about?

The passion of Paul's life was Christ's church. Think about Paul. When writing to the Corinthians he lets them see something of the hardships he has faced for the gospel.

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

But the list seems to build to a crescendo when Paul speaks of his zeal for the church:

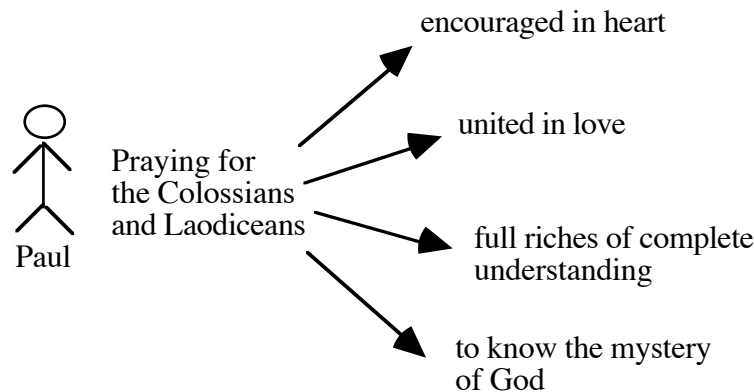
And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)

In this section of Colossians we find the same passion for the body of Christ. Paul the prisoner, chained to a guard twenty-four hours a day in a rented house in Rome, tells the church of Colossae, which he has never even visited, that he struggles for them.

We saw the Greek word Paul employs at the end of our last study. The word is *agona*, from which we get our word agony. The word could bring to the mind of the reader the image of an athlete competing earnestly in a difficult contest. But Paul *agonizes*, *struggles*, strives for the Colossians through prayer (2:1-5)¹.

¹ This is the same word Paul uses in 4:12 when speaking of the faithful prayers of Epaphras. He is *always struggling on your behalf in his prayers*.

What is the content of Paul's prayer?



Paul's prayer builds. He deeply desires the Colossians to have a full understanding of Jesus. He wants them to know Him. Kent Hughes ponders the value of such knowledge.

What you think of Christ, your conception of him, is everything. If you believe in Jesus Christ, that he is eternal, without beginning and without end, that he always was continuing; if you believe that he is creator of everything, every cosmic speck across trillions of light-years of trackless space, the creator of the textures and shapes and colors which daily dazzle your eyes; if you believe that he is the sustainer of all creation, the force which is presently holding the atoms of your body, your town, this universe together, and that without him all would dissolve; if you believe that he is the mystery, the incarnate reconciler who will one day reconcile the universe and redeem humanity to himself; if you believe that he is the love of your soul, who loves you with a love bounded only by his infinitude; then, despite the fact that life will be full of trouble, nothing much will go wrong. Your vision of Christ will quicken and shape your life. What you believe about Christ makes all the difference in the world now and in eternity. (Hughes, p. 54)

How have you seen your *beliefs* about Christ change your life? In what ways do your *beliefs* regulate your behavior? Do they affect your countenance?

If we look at this prayer as a whole we see the community dimension of *good theology*. Knowing Christ is not an intellectual exercise. Proper beliefs about our Lord stem from being united in love. It is as if Paul says, *Practice being the loving body of Christ so that you will be able to know the Christ who created the church.*

Notice how different Paul's prayer is from many of our prayers. Though these things are important, we don't find Paul praying for the physical health or material prosperity of the Colossians. His primary concern is with the church's relation to God!

Review the biblical prayers referenced in study three (pp. 16-17). Have you been learning to pray like this since studying these verses? Work on this as a group. Use these as a model for your prayers for one another.

2. Paul's encouragement (vss. 6-7)

Often Christians of our era understand their faith as the act of *believing the right things about Jesus*. Christians in Paul's time had the same problem. One of the themes of Paul's letters is the fact that theology (beliefs about God) and ethics (how we live our lives) are integrally related. Consider Colossians 2:6:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord (refers to the inception of the Colossian's faith), so walk in him (refers to the out-working of the Colossian's faith).¹

2:6-7 How many figures of speech can you find in these verses? Paul is famous for mixing his metaphors. Which is your favorite in this verse?

2:7 the word *rooted* is rich with significance. Paul uses the perfect tense in Greek which is hard to capture succinctly in an English translation. Basically it describes *a present state that is the result of some past action*. (Patzia, p. 49)² We could over translate the word *having been and continuing to be firmly rooted*.

Paul is assuring his readers of their solid foundation in the faith. Their *rootedness* is not dependent on their works, their feelings, the depth of their experience or their participation in home group. Believers were and are *firmly rooted* in Christ. Salvation is his work, not ours!

How do each of Paul's images lend insight into living out of your Christian life?

- *rooted*

¹ This relation of belief and practice will dominate Colossians chapter 3. Paul spends most of the first two chapters of the letter concentrating on what Jesus has done for the Colossians and then shifts gears. *Since this is who you are in Christ, here is how you should act*. . .

² Dana and Mantey go a bit further in their Greek grammar. The perfect tense is *the tense of complete action. Its basal significance is the progress of an act or state to a point of culmination and the existence of its finished results. That is, it views action as a finished product. . . . It implies a process, but views that process as having reached its consummation and existing in a finished state*. (*A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 200)

- *built up* (Paul changes to the present tense here which suggests a continual process of being built up)
- *strengthened* (also a present tense)
- *overflowing with thankfulness*¹

3. Paul's warning (vss. 8-10)

The Bible sees a very close relation of one's thought life and one's personhood.

One translation of Proverbs 23:7 reads, *For as he thinks within himself, so he is*². In other words, as one children's song might be paraphrased, *Be careful little mind what you think*. . . because you will become what you think. In 1949 Richard Weaver wrote a book entitled *Ideas Have Consequences*. There is no place those consequences are more acutely felt than in the human spirit.

2:8-10 Here Paul warns the church of the dangers of Gnostic teaching while affirming the centrality and all sufficiency of Christ.

Look at the chart on page 25 of this study. The Gnostics taught that one had to climb up the ladder (not literally) of the emanations of gods in order to reach the ultimate god. This virtually impossible task was accomplished through asceticism, legalism, the cultivation of ecstatic religious experience, etc.³

¹ The word *overflowing* is one of Paul's favorites (his letters use the word 26 times). The word itself carries the picture of a river overflowing its banks. See Colossians 1:3,12; 3:15; 4:2. Thanksgiving is a huge feature of the Christian life!

² NASB.

³ Much has been made of a phrase in verse 8, *the elemental spirits of the world*. The Greek text reads, *stoicheia tou kosmou*, (στοιχία του κόσμου), literally, *the elements of the world*. English translations often add the word *spirits* or *principles* to the phrase. They read, *elemental spirits of the universe* (RSV), *elementary principles of the world* (NASB), *ruling spirits of the universe* (GNB), and *empty superstitions of spirit beings* (The Message).

Scholars have used much ink and paper on this phrase. The issue revolves around the meaning of *stoicheia tou kosmou*. Is Paul referring to the *elements of the universe* or the *elemental spirits of the universe*, i.e., demonic forces? (cf. Patzia, pp. 51-53) Biblical scholar Walter Wink argues for the former.

In Col. 2:8 *stoicheia* seems to refer to the philosophical search for the first elements or founding principles of the physical universe. *Stoicheion* had long since become synonymous with *arche* in the sense of 'first principle,' and the Colossians hymn stresses that Christ is not only prior to all the *archai* but is himself the firstborn of all creation (1:15-16). (*Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, p. 74).

How does Paul respond to such teaching in these verses?

Where are the Colossians to find *fullness*?

2:9-10 should warm our hearts and elicit praise. The Colossians need to look no further than Christ for the answers to life's questions. In the man Jesus we meet God himself! The fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. . .

H. G. C. Moule brings out the sheer beauty of these words:

For in Him resides, as in a settled and congenial home, all the fullness of the Deity, the whole glorious total of what God is, the supreme Nature in its infinite entirety; in bodily fashion, conditioned now as to its manifestation and communication by His sacred bodily state. (H. G. C. Moule, p. 144, emphasis Moule's)

Paul goes on to affirm that we have the fullness of Christ by virtue of our relation to him.

Thus, in union with Christ our every spiritual need is fully met. Possessing him, we possess all. There was no need, therefore, for the Colossians to turn to the "philosophy" of the errorists, the ritual of the Mosaic law, or the spirit-beings worshipped by the pagan world. All they needed was in Jesus Christ. (Vaughan, p. 199)

Explore the first sentence by Vaughan above. What does it mean for you, personally, to have *every spiritual need met* in Christ. What affect does this have on your relation to good works, to worship, to giving (tithing), to service?

Wink goes on to point out that prior to the third century A.D. there is no record of *stoicheia* being used of demonic or angelic beings (spirits). Walter Martin's summary tries to incorporate both views of this phrase:

The lords which govern the planetary spheres are debunked by Paul 'to stand for all the forces in the universe opposed to Christ and his people' (Bruce). . . . we have inherited from Paul the basic confidence that no force in the world 'demonic' or human, impersonal or personal, structural or individualistic - can separate us from God's love in Christ (Rom. 8:30). The key to the mysteries of the cosmos as well as the ills, tragedies, contrarities, and perversities of our human lot is offered in what Paul regarded as a major component of his 'gospel,' namely, Christ's oneness with humanity in its lostness and alienation and his victory - in which we are invited to share - over all cosmic/superhuman powers that are inimical to humankind as God's creatures and children. (Martin, pp. 117-118)

Alexander Maclaren (1826-1910) was a well-known Baptist preacher in 19th century England. He acquired the reputation *of the prince of expository preachers* during his forty-five year pastorate at Union Chapel in Manchester. Consider his thoughts about Christ from his commentary on Colossians. Use these words to provoke praise and adoration of our Lord.

In Christ, as in a great storehouse, lie all the riches of spiritual wisdom, the massive ingots of solid gold which when coined into creed and doctrines are the wealth of the Church. All which we can know concerning God and man, concerning sin and righteousness and duty, concerning another life, is in Him who is the home and deep mine where truth is stored. . . . The central fact of the universe and the perfect encyclopaedia of all moral and spiritual truth is Christ, the Incarnate Word, the Lamb slain, the ascended King. (from Hughes, p. 55)

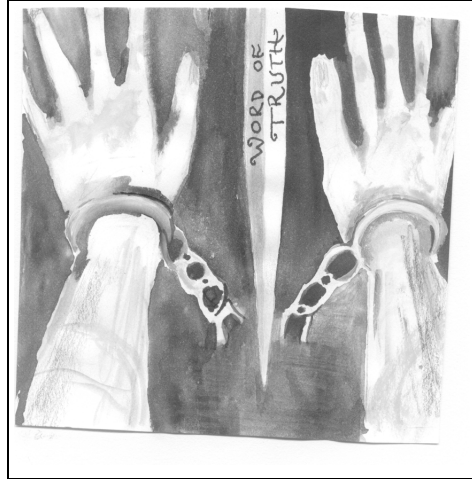
Sermon Notes. . .

Study Eight

Christ The Liberator

Colossians 2:11-19

11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.



16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, 19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

Jewish legalism was a huge problem which threatened to divide the first century church.¹ At the center of the debate was the issue of circumcision. Teachers who insisted on this physical operation for Gentile converts were, in essence, saying, *You need to become a Jew in order to be saved.* But even a casual look at Judaism reveals a people caught up in an earned righteousness. Paul staked his entire ministry on the fact that the grace of God sets his children free from *keeping score*, from *working* for one's salvation.²

¹ The *Colossian heresy* included both Jewish and Gnostic elements. This combination is referred to as syncretism, the combining of religions. Our text in this study can best be understood when we think of both Jewish legalism and Gnostic teaching. Paul appears to have both in mind in vss. 16-19.

² See the book of Galatians, Paul's angry letter, for a full treatment of circumcision. Luke's account of the *Jerusalem Council* in Acts 15 will also illuminate the issue.

Paul deeply desires that the Colossians be set free, liberated, from the constraints of legalism (Jewish or Gnostic). He wants the church to understand the liberating work of Jesus on the cross.

Read these verses. Before going on in this study consider the following questions:

- How do these verses speak to you personally?
- In what ways do find yourself being something of a legalist (perhaps through guilt at not making the grade or pride at having accomplished so much in your Christian life)?

2:11 is loaded with significance. In the ESV it reads,

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ. . .

Notice how easily Paul dispenses with the issue of physical circumcision in this verse.

Compare the following verses with Paul's notion of *putting off the body of flesh*. What is the New Testament equivalent of the Jewish rite of physical circumcision?

- Romans 6:6
- Romans 7:24
- Ephesians 4:22
- Colossians 3:9-10

Compare your *new self* with your *old self*. What are the chief differences? How has Christ changed the *outside* of your life? How has he changed the *inside* of your life? Share these changes with your homegroup.

The phrase in verse 11, *by the circumcision of Christ*, is loaded with significance.

In this context 'putting (or stripping) off the body of flesh' is most plausibly contrasted with the minor operation in circumcision: bluntly it appears to say that instead of stripping off a little piece of flesh, as in circumcision, the Christian has stripped off his whole body of flesh, and this has happened because Christ was 'circumcised,' that is, killed on the cross, the Christian shares so completely in that event, it is as if he himself had suffered that appalling bloody death.¹ (Beasley-Murray, cited in Patzia, p. 59)

Verses 13-15 succinctly state the wonder of our salvation. Each phrase is powerfully saturated with the saving work of God. Consider the dominant images in these verses. What do these affirmations mean? Fill in the right hand column:

dead in your trespasses	=	unable to respond to God or to please God
uncircumcision of your flesh	=	
God made you alive	=	
by canceling the record of debt that stood against us. . .	=	
This he set aside, nailing it to the cross	=	
disarmed the rulers and authorities, and put them to open shame. . .	=	

What benefit did the cross of Christ produce, what liberation did Christ accomplish?

The writers of the Scriptures affirm that Jesus forgives our sins and then, often, they ponder the means of our forgiveness. God doesn't simply say to his children, *It's okay, I forgive you.* . . The wages of sin (Romans 6:23) is death. The weight of our sin when measured against the greatness of his holiness makes forgiveness a difficult problem. In the eleventh century Archbishop Anselm wrote a classic of Christian literature, *Cur Deus Homo?* (*Why Did God Become Man?*). If we think God can simply forgive sin we have not yet

¹ If this interpretation is correct, the NIV is misleading. There we read, *In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ.* . . In this version, Christ does the circumcising, spiritually, of the believer. In Beasley-Murray's view, it is Christ who is *circumcised*, that is, crucified.

considered *the seriousness of sin*. John Stott adds, nor have we *considered the majesty of God*. (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, p. 88)

With this in mind think through these verses. The phrase in 2:14 is intriguing to say the very least. Jesus took the *written code* (NIV) which was against us and nailed it to the cross.

What is this *record of debt*? The Greek word used is *chairographon*. Literally the word means *handwriting*. It referred to *a bond, a contract, or an ordinance*. (Pokorny, p. 137)¹ There are two dominant views as to what Paul has in mind:

Is Paul referring to an ancient indictment which was written to formally charge a prisoner? If this is the case then Paul is referring to our collective sins. Barclay calls this *record of debt* a *self-confessed indictment against them, a charge-list which, as it were, they themselves had signed and had admitted as accurate*. (Barclay p. 142)

The other, and somewhat complimentary, view of the meaning of *chairographon* is that Paul is referring to the law of the Old Testament. One Old Testament Scholar writes, *the Jewish people might be said to have signed the contract when they bound themselves by a curse to observe all the enactments of the law*.²

Consider Deuteronomy 27:14 -18 in this regard.

And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel in a loud voice:

Cursed be the man who makes a carved or cast metal image, an abomination to the LORD, a thing made by the hands of a craftsman, and sets it up in secret.

And all the people shall answer and say, *Amen*.

Cursed be anyone who dishonors his father or his mother.

And all the people shall answer and say, *Amen*.

Cursed be anyone who moves his neighbor's landmark.

And all the people shall answer and say, *Amen*.

Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.

¹ Lightfoot says of this word, *chairographon*, which means properly an autograph of any kind, is used almost exclusively for a note of hand, a bond or obligation, as having the 'sign-manual' of the debtor or contractor. (Lightfoot, p. 186)

² Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, p. 331-332

And all the people shall answer and say, *Amen*.

The people bound themselves to the law, failed to keep the law and therefore had a *certificate of debt* against them.

Regardless of which view is correct, notice the work of Jesus on the cross. What did he do with the *certificate of debt*?

First, Jesus *canceled* it. Literally he *wiped it clean*.

Second, he nailed it to the cross. Paul has in mind the ancient practice of placing a written tablet on the cross of a condemned man carrying the charges for which he was condemned. Thus when people passed the suffering convict they would understand what led to his plight. Jesus took our *record of debt* and nailed it to his own cross!!!

The J.B. Phillips paraphrase captures the image:

He has forgiven you all your sins: Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and had completely annulled it by nailing it over his own head on the cross.

Are you ever troubled by a guilty conscience? How Paul's words in this chapter help? What more could God do for you to take away your *feelings* of guilt?

In September 1984 Victor Fimia was arrested in Santa Rosa, California for panhandling. It turns out that while he was incarcerated at the Sonoma County Jail the authorities discovered that he had been officially *missing* for seven years. They also found something which made a mockery of Fimia's begging practices. The vagrant, it turns out, was the beneficiary of an inheritance of several million dollars! Fimia's poverty of economy was completely unnecessary. Fimia was not just filthy, he was filthy rich while begging for spare change on the street corner.

This is how it is with us when we resort to legalism (Colossians 2:16-19). Our forgiveness, our standing before God, our place in his kingdom is assured. It is an inheritance (Ephesians 1:18) based on what Christ has done and not on the spare change of legalistic righteousness. The problem is we don't always act according to our inheritance in Christ.

What does your freedom from legalism mean to you at a practical level? How do you live your life as a free person in Christ?

What does 2:19 reveal about the secret to an abundant Christian life? What is the secret of success?

Respond to William Hendrickson's thoughts on our freedom from legalism:

This (our freedom) does not mean that the moral law has lost significance for the believer. It cannot imply that he should now forget about loving God above all and the neighbor as himself. On the contrary, the law of love has eternal validity (Rom. 13:8, 9; Gal. 5:14). It is the believer's supreme delight. He obeys it out of gratitude for the salvation that he has already received as a gift of God's sovereign grace. But he has been discharged from the law viewed as a code of rules and regulations, a means of obtaining eternal life, a curse threatening to destroy him. (Hendrickson, p. 121)

Think through this passage as a whole. How do these verses motivate you to live the Christian life? Jesus went through death itself to procure your salvation. What does this do to your guts? Has this study stirred your heart toward worship and action?

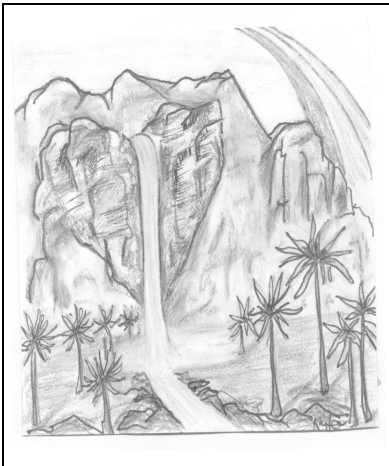
Sermon Notes. . .

Study Nine

Habits of the Heart

Colossians 2:20-3:4

20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 21 "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the



indulgence of the flesh. 3:1 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

The demand of the Christian faith is all-encompassing. We are repeatedly called in the pages of the Scriptures to live lives that please God.

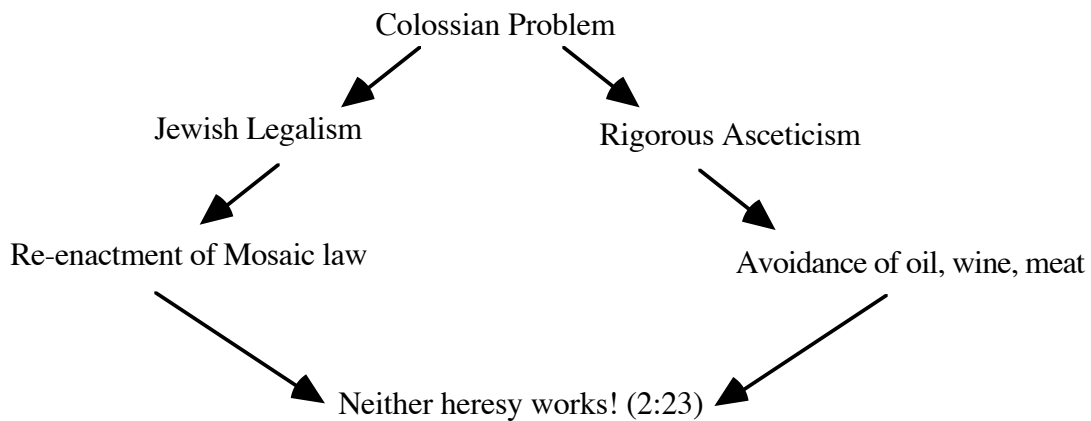
Behavior is important. But the motives behind our behavior are equally important. If we *do the right thing* without heartfelt devotion to God our actions eventually end up producing either pride or guilt in us and accomplish nothing.

Paul continues to express his concern for the Colossian church in these verses. It is as if he asks, *What are the habits of your heart?* He is flabbergasted at even the possibility of legalism or asceticism¹ in the church. *What the heck are you doing???* Paul asks the Colossians. Verse 20 is strong. The Greek grammar could be translated *Since you died with Christ. . . why are you going the way of self-effort?*

The problem seems to creep up at every juncture of the Christian's life. We begin with a recognition of our spiritual poverty and come to God as recipients of his grace. But, in time, we fall away from an awareness of our condition. We think that having certain experiences or avoiding certain activities will better our position before God.

Read these eight verses in as many translations as you have available and see if the following diagram makes sense of Paul's thoughts.

¹ Asceticism is defined as *the religious doctrine that one can reach a higher spiritual state by rigorous self-discipline and self-denial*. In Gnosticism there was a deep effort to receive or produce visions, mystic insight and knowledge through rigorous self-denial.



Compare these verses with Galatians 2:18-21. The entire Galatian letter was written against legalism. One commentator calls these verses from Galatians a *beautiful explanation* of our verses in Colossians.

Before going on in this study think through the following questions:

- What is Paul's practical solution to legalism and asceticism?
- If legalism is our effort to help God save us, how can Paul command his readers to apply their own effort (3:1) to get out of legalism? Isn't this fighting fire with fire (or works-based righteous with works-based righteousness)?

What do you find helpful in assisting you to set your heart and mind on the things above? Make a list of things which will help you *set* you mind and heart on the things above.

2:21-22 Four Complaints

Notice Paul's four complaints about legalism and asceticism.

First, they are enslaving. Paul mocks such rules and regulations when he summarizes them, *Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!*

Second, they are only temporary. These are all destined to perish with use. . . (2:22) Literally the Greek text reads, *which things are all for corruption in the using*. (Patzia, p. 65)

Third, they are human (as opposed to divine) in origin. The phrase (human commands and teachings) looks back to Matthew 15:9 where Jesus distinguishes between the divine law as given to Moses and the rabbis' interpretation of the law. Here Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13.

Read Matthew 15:1-9 and Isaiah 29:13. How do these two passages explain the meaning of Colossians 2:21-22?

Hendrickson comments on these verses,

The point of all this teaching, both in Isaiah and in the words of Jesus, is not only to show that such man-made ordinances and the doctrines from which they spring are worthless, but also and emphatically that they are worse than worthless, that is, actually harmful. Hence, according to the Isaiah passage a woe is pronounced upon those who substitute the commandment of men for the heart-centered fear of Jehovah, and in the context of the Matthew passage Jesus sharply denounces those in his day who nullified the word of God for the sake of their tradition (Matt. 15:6). (Hendrickson, p. 132)

Fourth, they are deceptive. They have an appearance of wisdom, but they don't produce the desired results.

In 2:17 Paul calls these things mere *shadows* of the reality which is found in Christ.

What *shadows* are we tempted to add to the Christian life in our own time? Think about the Christian world you inhabit. Are your Christian friends prone to asceticism or legalism? If so, what does this look like? Are certain *Christian experiences* understood as essential for one to be a *real Christian*? What would those experiences be?

The opposite of legalism/asceticism is lawlessness. If the legalist says, *Stay away from it, it might be fun*, the lawless believer (called antinomianism) says, *Whoopee, this is fun! We can sin, 'cause God will forgive us!!!*

To which error is the American church prone? To which error is SBCC prone? To which error are you prone? Does your circle of Christian friends lean toward one or the other heresy?

2:23 Paul speaks of false humility in this verse. This brings to mind what C. S. Lewis calls the *Great Sin*, that is, the sin of pride. Consider this subtle, and yet pernicious, sin from the following references. How can we guard against this sin?

- Romans 12:16
- Romans 1:21-30
- 1 Timothy 6:3-5
- James 4:6
- 1 Peter 5:5

3:1-4 begins Paul's practical section of Colossians. These verses begin to state Paul's solution to his four complaints in 2:21-22. What do you make of his two commands in vss. 1-2? What can you do, on a very realistic level, to fulfill these imperatives?

How can you carry out this list without reverting to a new form of legalism?

Most battles in the Christian's life are won or lost in the mind before they are played out in the externals of life. Consider James' analysis of temptation and sin:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

James 1:13-15 (emphasis added)

3:1 We have been raised with Christ by virtue of our union with him which is actualized in faith and symbolized in baptism.

The cleansing power of Christ's blood and Spirit had been signified and sealed to them in baptism. The supply of grace remains plentiful. Right now - they need not wait until the day of the Parousia!¹ - they are raised with Christ. They possess within themselves the life of the resurrection. (Hendrickson, p. 140)

Paul's command, therefore, is that the Colossians experience the reality which is already theirs.² The verse literally reads, *seek where Christ is*. . . Paul uses a present imperative verb which could be rendered, *be constantly seeking*, or, *be in the habit of seeking*.

Again, think about your life. Are you a continual seeker?

Kent Hughes comments on our tendency to wander from the center of our Christian lives. In what ways does the following quotation describe your life with Christ?

¹ A reference to the second coming of Jesus.

² Paul is fond of describing a believer's state (the indicative) and then urging the believer to live up to his or her calling (the imperative). *Basically, it is the 'you are' and the 'you ought' of the Christian life. In some ways this concept comes across as a paradox in Paul's thought. On the one hand, he can say that, by virtue of his or her position in Christ, the believer is 'dead to sin,' 'light in the Lord,' 'a new creature,' and so forth. But then on the other hand, Paul says, 'Now become what you are,' that is, live as if you were dead to sin, light in the Lord, new creatures.* (Patzia, p. 68) We will look at this in more detail in study eight.

I have seen in my own life and the lives of those I have counseled that there is a tendency to move away from where we had our beginning: the Cross. All of our theology, all of our preaching, all of our singing hymns together, the disciplines of life experienced in family and relationships are meant to keep us right at the foot of the Cross - simply drinking long and deep from the Fountainhead, Jesus Christ. (Hughes, p. 87)

3:1 speaks of Jesus at the right hand of God. The image is familiar throughout the New Testament:

Acts 2:33 *Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.*

Acts 7:55 *But [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*

Acts 7:56 *And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*

Romans 8:34 *Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died-- more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.*

In Colossians Paul uses this *right hand* of God image to silence those false teachers who diminished the preeminence of Jesus. There is no higher authority than Christ.

Notice how positive holiness is in these verses. Often we think of the really holy person as one who *doesn't do* certain things. Paul's emphasis is quite the opposite. The man or woman of God is set free from self-absorbing selfishness. The one who is seeking Christ, whose life is hidden in Christ, is free to enjoy life to its fullest!

The enormous temptation in all of life is to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. . . the world is wider than that in all directions, more dangerous and more bitter, more extravagant and bright. We are making hay when we should be making whoopee; we are raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain or Lazarus.

Annie Dillard

Study Ten

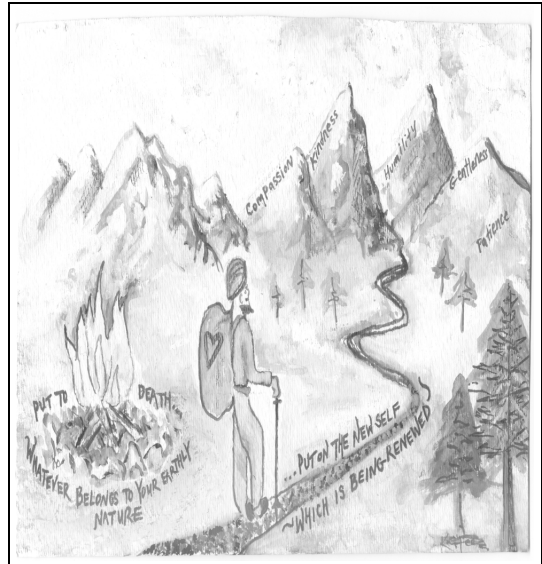
Actions From the Heart

Colossians 3:5-14

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.

8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.



In his letters Paul is fond of affirming the wonderful things accomplished for us in Christ. We might call this the *indicative* of the Christian life. Romans, perhaps the greatest of Paul's letters, spends eight chapters delineating, explaining, proclaiming and affirming what it is which God has done for his children in Christ. The first half of the letter to the Ephesians similarly deals with the indicative of the Christian's life.

But after Paul's magnificent affirmations of the *indicative* he always moves to the *imperative* of discipleship. In Romans he writes,

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Romans 12:1

In Ephesians he makes a similar move to the practical side of the Christian life.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called. . .

Ephesians 4:1

Kent Hughes comments on this pattern in Paul. *For Paul, doctrine demands duty; creed determines conduct; facts demand acts.* (Hughes, p. 95)

Read these verses in as many translations as you have available. Keep the following outline in mind as you read:

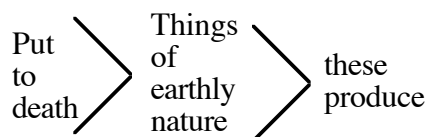
1. **3:5-9** Vices of the Old Life

2. **3:10-14** Virtues of the New Life

Consider Paul's list of vices. His imagery is compelling. He mixes the metaphor of *putting to death* (vs. 5) with the metaphor of taking off one's clothes (vs. 8). When Paul says the Colossians must *put away* the vices of anger, rage, malice etc. he is saying *take off the clothes of the old life*. We have seen this image already in Colossians (2:11) and we find it in Ephesians 4:22, 24.

One's sins are like an old garment that is taken off and discarded so that a new one can be put on. . . . Such language accounts for a custom in many churches when candidates for baptism by immersion "put off" their old, ordinary clothes and "put on" white robes to symbolize their new or resurrected life in Christ. (Patzia, p. 74)

Diagram Paul's sentence in vss. 5-6:



which is

What do these things produce (vs. 6)?

Barclay points out the extravagant nature of the call to purity in Paul's time.

Chastity was the one completely new virtue which Christianity brought into the world. In the ancient world sexual relationships before marriage were the normal and accepted practice. The sexual appetite was regarded as a thing to be gratified, not to be controlled. (Barclay, pp. 150-151)

Barclay goes on to paint a grisly picture of what the NIV calls *greed*.

There is the sin which the Revised Standard Version calls covetousness (*pleonexia*). *Pleonexia* is one of the ugliest of sins but while it is quite clear what it means, it is by no means so easy to find a single word to translate it. It comes from two Greek words; the first half of the word is *pleon* which means *more* and the second half is from *echein* which means *to have*. *Pleonexia* is basically the desire to have more. (Barclay, 151)

Paul was a man who cultivated *contentment* (the opposite of *pleonexia*) in his life. He writes to the Philippians,

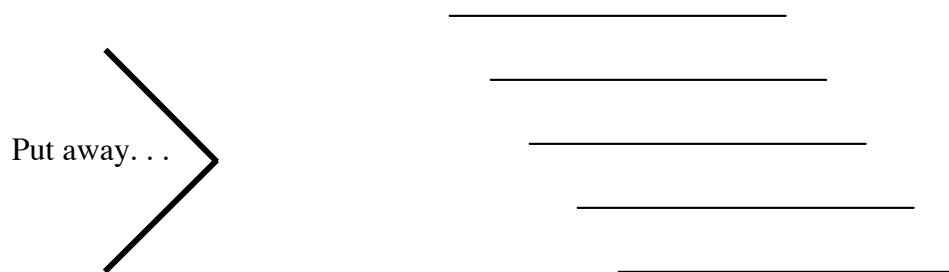
. . . *for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.*
Phil. 4:11

We are in what might be called a culture of greed. In the late 1980s Ivan Boesky pronounced the dictum which characterized the decade: *Greed is good!* Enough is rarely enough. Though we are among the wealthiest of all peoples ever to live, we tend to crave more and such cravings are encouraged at every turn.

- How can the church help in this area? If we are called to contentment what can the community of believers do to assist each individual's proclivity toward greed?
- What is the difference between *contentment* and *sloth* or laziness? Proverbs 6:6, among many other proverbs, advises industry and hard work. *Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!* How can we be industrious, hard working and yet, un-greedy?
- Why does Paul say greed is the same thing as idolatry?

- Is there a relation between immorality and greed as Paul's list might suggest? What is the relation? Why do the two go together?

3:8 Now work on Paul's second set of vices. What do each of these bring to mind?



Compare both lists of vices. Which of these do you see in your own life? Share with your group one area in which they can pray for you.

Are you presently *putting to death* this vice? What does it mean to put a vice to death? Compare Matthew 5:29.

What progress have you made in the past year in this area of your discipleship?

What is the biblical basis for our ability to *put these things to death* and to *put away* these vices?

Respond to Alexander Maclaren's comment on these verses:

It is far easier to cut off the hand, which after all is not me, than to sacrifice passions and desires which, though they be my worst self, are myself.¹

How can we accomplish this difficult task? Verse 10 contains a relevant change of voice in the Greek text. He moves from the *active* voice (Put to death!) to the *passive* voice. Our new self is being renewed. Paul employs a present participle in the passive voice rendered, *is being renewed* in the ESV and NIV. Renewal is continuous and has an outside source, God himself.

These verses, when taken as a whole, lend insight into how we can be successful in getting rid of our vices. On the one side is God, who is renewing each disciple. On the other is our own volition. We are to be active in the habits of the heart. Could Paul be suggesting the coaching maxim, The best defense is a good offense?

Think about your Christian life. Is your strategy primarily offensive or defensive? Do you concentrate on what you shouldn't be doing or on what you should be doing?

3:12-14 Paul turns to the positive side of his lists. Here he employs again his clothing image, clothe yourselves.

Notice the picture of church life which emerges in this list. The Colossians are to be compassionate, forgiving, loving etc. In other words, Paul's list assumes friction, and trouble in the church. Rubbing one another the wrong way from time to time should be the normal expectation of church life. What really matters is our willingness to forgive our grievances and love each other as we stumble. May it always be so in Santa Barbara Community Church!

It would be a *good thing* for our homegroups to pray to this end!

¹ Cited in, Vaughan, p. 275

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Eleven

In the Name of Jesus

Colossians 3:15—4:1

15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you



richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

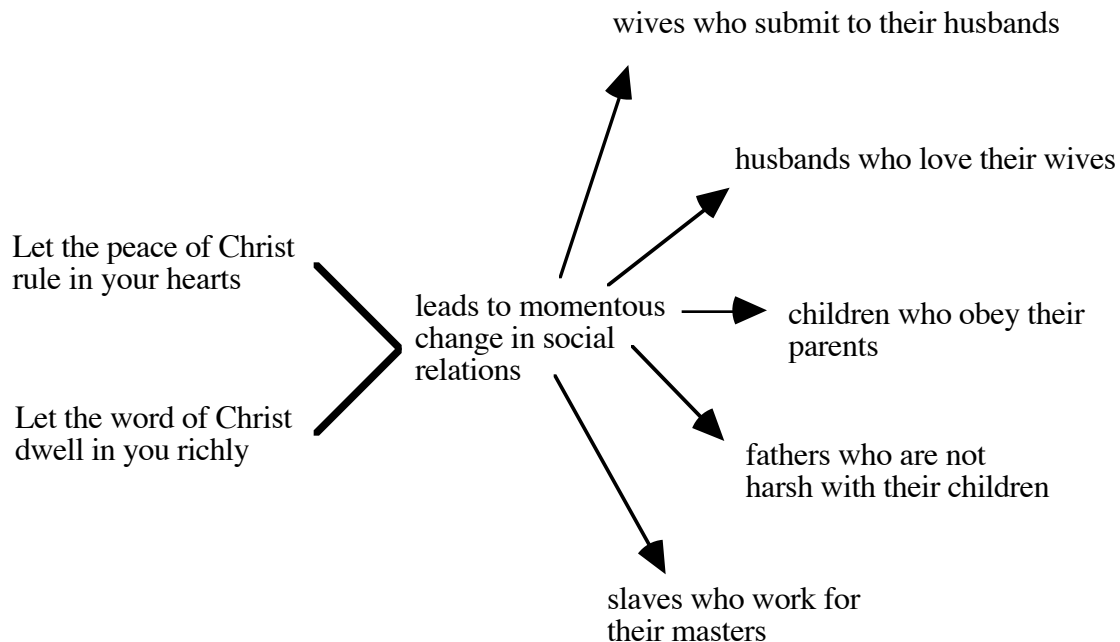
18 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

19 Husbands, love your wives,

and do not be harsh with them. 20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. 21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. 22 Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. 4:1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

In the end, Paul insists that all Christian behavior flows from our commitment to Jesus. The believer is to be ruled by the *peace* of Christ, indwelt by the *word* of Christ and behaving in the *name* of Christ.

This Christ-centered approach to living, we shall see, re-shapes all of our earthly relations in dramatic fashion. Paul writes as a former Pharisee who has been liberated from legalistic efforts to accomplish his own righteousness (see the beginning of study six). His concern, therefore, is to see the Colossians live the Christian life for the right reasons, to live from the perspective of Christ! This final section of his letter emphasizes the point:



At the outset, catch a glimpse of the main point of the text. Paul is calling believers to be men and women who allow the peace of Christ and the word of Christ to permeate their lives.

In 3:15 the word *rule* translates the Greek word *brabeuo*, which occurs only here in the New Testament. Originally the word meant *to act as umpire*. By Paul's time the word acquired the notion of *acting as an arbitrator*.

What is the *peace of Christ* in 3:15? Does this refer to the peace which Christ promises to each believer with God? Notice how Paul uses the word *peace* in the following verses.

Romans 5:1 *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Romans 8:6 *To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*

Romans 14:17 *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

Romans 15:13 *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*

Or, does Paul have in mind the *peace of Christ* which oversees life in the church and in society?

Romans 12:18 *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Romans 14:19 *So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*

1 Corinthians 14:33 *For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.*

2 Corinthians 13:11 *Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.*

Paul may have both concepts in mind. F. F. Bruce writes,

“Let the peace of Christ arbitrate in your hearts,” he says. When hostile forces have to be kept at bay, the peace of God garrisons the believer’s heart, as in Phil. 4:7. But here the mutual relations of fellow-members of the body of Christ are in view; where differences threaten to spring up among them, the peace of Christ must be accepted as arbitrator. (Bruce, p. 282)

Curtis Vaughn adds,

Here it means that in all inner conflicts as well as in all disputes and differences among Christians, Christ’s peace must give the final decision. (Vaughan, p. 215)

Share the state of your soul with your group. How does the peace of Christ arbitrate, rule and guide your soul? If you find yourself to be anxious about God and things in your life, review the great teaching of Colossians. Paul presents Jesus as the final solution to the problems of the universe, personal and cosmic! Why do those of us who are prone to stress have a difficult time appropriating the peace of Christ? Is there a hint in Colossians 3:16?

When Paul says *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly* we might ask what he means by *you*. Is Paul referring to individual Christians? In this case he means we need to know and meditate upon the word of God in our daily quest to know God. Does Paul, on the other hand, have the church in mind here? Does *you* mean *among you* (that is, among the Christian community)?

Perhaps he would not have cared to be pinned down too firmly to either alternative, although if one of the two had to be accepted, the collective sense might be preferred in view of the context. Let there be ample scope

for the proclamation of the Christian message and the impartation of Christian teaching in their meetings. (Bruce, p. 283)

What does this section of Colossians teach us about corporate worship (both in our homegroups and our Sunday gatherings)?

3:16 teaches a profound truth. Teaching and admonition are not the sole responsibility of the preacher in the church. This is a *one another* activity of church life. We are to teach and admonish *one another*. What opportunities do you have to *teach and admonish in all wisdom* in church life? Share an example of this for the benefit of your homegroup. How would Santa Barbara Community Church change for the better if every member of our congregation applied this verse in his or her life?

3:17 is about as comprehensive as possible. Everything we do (word and deed) is to be done in the *name* of Jesus and overshadowed by thankfulness.

- What does it mean to do something in the *name* of Jesus?
- How might this command affect the arteries of your life (work, play, marriage, etc.)?

When we allow Christ to permeate our lives there will be an effect in our social relations (see chart on page 66). Paul's words for wives, husbands, children, fathers and slaves ran against the grain of first century expectations. Wives were understood as the property of their husbands, children were the property of their parents and slaves had no rights whatsoever. Barclay's comment about the status of wives gives us an indication of how different first century middle eastern society was from our own.

Under Jewish law (not necessarily biblical law) a woman was a thing, the possession of her husband, just as much as his house or his flocks or his material goods. She had no legal rights whatever. For instance, under Jewish law, a husband could divorce his wife for any cause, while a wife

had no rights whatever in the initiation of divorce; and the only grounds on which a divorce might be awarded her were if her husband developed leprosy, became an apostate or ravished a virgin. In Greek society a respectable woman lived a life of entire seclusion. She never appeared on the streets alone, not even to go marketing. She lived in the women's apartments and did not join her menfolk even for meals. From her there was demanded complete servitude and chastity; but her husband could go out as much as he chose and could enter into as many relationships outside marriage as he liked without incurring any stigma. Under both Jewish and Greek laws and custom all the privileges belonged to the husband and all the duties to the wife. (Barclay, p. 161. parenthesis added)

With this in mind consider Paul's words in 3:18-4:1. Notice how all relations are to be understood in light of the lordship of Christ.

In marriage, Paul instructs wives to submit to their husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Place this command in the context of Colossians 3:5-17. What does submission include? What would it not include?¹

Certainly the most revolutionary and counter-cultural command in this text is the command that husbands love their wives. As the quotation above indicates, love was not a large part of first century marriage. In the parallel Ephesians passage Paul calls husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her!

Is the command, either to the wife or to the husband conditional, that is dependent on the behavior of the spouse?

Why would Paul leave out conditions which must be met before a mate submits and loves his/her spouse?

If you are married (singles are off the hook here. . .) share with the group what submission/love means to you and how this is exercised in your marriage.

¹ The parallel passage in Ephesians 5:21-33 begins with a participle, *submitting one to another out of reverence for Christ*. It seems husbands and wives are to be in a contest of who can most serve, love and submit to the other.

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Twelve

Praying With Epaphras

Colossians 4:2-18

2 Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 3 At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— 4 that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

5 Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

7 Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, 9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here.

10 Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), 11 and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. 12 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. 13 For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. 14 Luke the beloved physician greets you, as does Demas. 15 Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. 16 And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. 17 And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."

18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Normally Paul ends his letters with several concluding comments and with several greetings he wants to especially remember. The letter to the Colossians is no exception to this rule. But, there is a theme that permeates this final section of Paul's epistle. He urges the Colossians to be steadfast in prayer.

Before going on in this study, read our passage.

- When you read these verses, what kind of person do you think Paul was?

- Make a list of the names in this section. What, if anything, do you know of these people?
- Two of the people Paul mentions are from Colossae. Which names are they?
- Make a list of the references to prayer and praying in these verses.
- How does Paul want the Colossians to pray for him and for his ministry?

Praying with Epaphras

Notice the emphasis on continued prayer in this section.

First, Paul commands prayer of the Colossian church (4:2), and second, he gives the church an example to follow, the example of Epaphras (4:12-13).

4:2 The call to Steadfastness

The call to prayer in the ESV reads *continue steadfastly*. The Greek verb is strong. It means *to endure*, or *to be steadfast*. The verb begins with a preposition that adds force to the verb.

The verb means “to be courageously persistent,” “to hold fast and not let go.” (MacArthur, p. 179)

Consider the larger New Testament teaching about the call to consistent prayer.

- Luke 18:1-8 (!)
- Romans 12:12
- Ephesians 6:18

4:2 The Call to Watch

Notice the way we are to pray. Paul says we are to be *watchful* in prayer. We are to stay alert when we pray.

What helps you to be *watchful* in prayer?

4:2 The Call to thanksgiving

We are also to be giving thanks in our prayers. This is a constant theme in biblical prayer (see the Psalms especially). Why should the believer's prayers be filled with thanksgiving? How will thanksgiving affect the way in which we pray?

When thieves robbed Matthew Henry, a Bible scholar of the 18th century, he wrote a prayer in his diary. Respond to his diary entry. What can you learn about your own prayers from Henry?

Let me be thankful first because I was never robbed before; second, although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because, although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, and not someone else.¹

¹ Cited in *He Has Made Me Glad*, by Ben Patterson, p. 67.

4:12-13 Praying with Epaphras

Finally, Paul mentions a living example of a prayer warrior. Epaphras, from Colossae, *struggles* on behalf of the Colossian church.

We have already run across this word in Colossians (1:29; 2:1, see p. 38). Paul *struggled* for the church in Colossae, and here we find Epaphras doing the same in prayer.

Most of us would not apply such a strong word to the activity of prayer. We think of prayer as our *quiet time* with the Lord. Prayer is *nice*, or, *devotional*, or it is *boring*. For Epaphras prayer was a wrestling match! He *labored earnestly* (NASB) in prayer.

How does this word-picture expand your understanding of prayer?

What is the content of this disciple's prayer for the believers in Colossae?

We have seen this before in Colossians (see study three). We are called to pray for more than jobs, health and smooth relationships. We are called, biblically, to pray for one another's spiritual maturity.

Spend time doing this for those in your homegroup. Pray that the members of your group will *stand mature*. Pray for the larger body of believers of Santa Barbara Community Church. Pray that God will bring our church to greater depth in spiritual maturity.

Think through the past 12 weeks of Bible study in Paul's letter to the Colossians. How have you grown in your understanding and appreciation of Christ during this study? Thumb through the pages of this study. What difference has your glimpse of the person and work of Jesus Christ made in your thinking, attitude and actions?

Paul's final words in his letter make for a suitable conclusion to our study.

Grace be with you.