

SIX LESSONS ON COLOSSIANS

3. List the words which describe the mature Christian in 1:23, 28; 2:2 and 5.
4. What was lacking in the afflictions of Christ? How did Paul complete what was lacking?
5. What was Paul's "divine office"?
6. What is the "mystery" of God said to be in 1:27 and 2:2?
7. Was Paul interested in developing an elite group of super-saints?
8. If "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hid in Christ, where does modern knowledge about medicine, physics, etc. fit in?
9. Are there people today who try to delude God's family with beguiling speech? What makes them so appealing?
10. How could Paul rejoice in the good order and firmness of the Colossian church when it was surrounded with heresy?

Lesson Nine

(2:6-23)

Steadfast Life In Christ (2:6-15)

6 As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live 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 makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; 12 and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.

V. 6 As Therefore You Received Christ Jesus The Lord – The unchanging standard of truth for all Christians is Jesus Christ and the gospel as originally preached. The Colossians could test for themselves to determine whether a new teaching was in line with the original truth or not (Col. 1:23; Gal. 1:9).

So Live In Him – Literally, "walk in him." The picture of the Christian life as a "walk" is common in Paul's letters (1:10), showing that the Christian life has movement, direction, and purpose.

When the Colossians originally heard the simple truth of the gospel, they gave their allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Now Paul called for them to live their lives in a manner that was consistent with that beginning.

As Paul was about to explain in detail, to "live in him" includes both right doctrine (2:8-23) and right conduct (3:1-4:6).

V. 7 Rooted And Built Up In Him – Paul blended two pictures here to describe the desired firmness of life in Christ. "Rooted" as a tree and "built upon a foundation" as a house, the Christian will have the strength and endurance to stand against the onslaught of evil.

Notice how often "in him," "in Christ," and "with him" occur in these verses. It has been well said that the best summary of the message of Colossians is simply the phrase, "in him."

And Established In The Faith – "Established" had become primarily a legal term in the Greek language. It referred to things that were legal and valid; hence, certain and reliable. If Christian faith is "rooted and built up" in Christ, it will be unshakable and durable. (See Eph. 4:14.)

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Just As You Were Taught – Again the test of originality was applied. Was their faith and conduct in line with the original teaching? The emphasis was on the finality and sufficiency of “the faith once for all delivered.”

Abounding In Thanksgiving – If they would learn to be properly grateful for life in Christ, they would be much less vulnerable to the appeal of false teaching.

V. 8 See To It That No One Makes A Prey Of You – The present tense of the command “see to it” meant that the Colossians must “watch and keep on watching” against false teaching. If they were not vigilant, the false teachers would “rob” them and “carry them off as booty.”

By Philosophy And Empty Deceit – Everything that had to do with theories about God and the world and the meaning of human life was called “philosophy” (literally, “love of wisdom”). This was true not only among the Greeks, but even among the Jews. Philosophy is not in itself a bad thing. Everyone has an understanding of what life is all about, and this is his philosophy. It is when philosophy becomes divorced from God and married to “empty deceit” that it is dangerous.

According To Human Tradition – Sometimes the theories of men are perpetuated in opposition to the revealed truth of God. As they are handed down from generation to generation, they acquire the dignity of “tradition.”

According To The Elemental Spirits Of The Universe – The word “spirits” is not in the Greek text and should not have been added to our translation here. (It is true that the word “elemental” was used in connection with spirit beings in the 4th century A.D., but this usage was unknown when Paul wrote Colossians.) Just as in the parallel uses of “elemental” in Gal. 4:3, 9 and Heb. 5:12, it was “elemental principles” of legalism that Paul meant. This brings the phrase into harmony with the preceding line (“according to human tradition”) and with the usage of the same word in 2:20. When they died to the “elemental things” in 2:20, they no longer belonged to the world and its regulations.

And Not According To Christ – This is what made the philosophy, traditions, and elementary principles wrong: they were not according to Christ.

V. 9 For In Him The Whole Fulness Of Deity Dwells Bodily – The Colossians did not need empty theories and speculation; they had everything in Christ. The totality of divine attributes and nature dwelt in him. Paul went beyond the similar statement of 1:19 to add a crucial word: “bodily.” Contrary to the teachings of the philosophy of “dualism” (1:15). God was not totally withdrawn from physical reality. He had entered time and space in a human body, in the person of Jesus Christ.

V. 10 You Have Come To Fulness Of Life In Him – Our only hope of fulness of life lies in him who possessed the whole fulness of deity. Compare Eph. 1:23 and 3:19.

Who Is The Head Of All Rule And Authority – Christ is not only the head of the church (1:18); he is the head over everything (Eph. 1:22). Even the angelic ranks (“rule” and “authority”) are in subjection to him (1:16).

V. 11 In Him Also You Were Circumcised – Circumcision was the mark of belonging to the old covenant (Gen. 17:10). It was performed on male babies on the eighth day, without their understanding or consent. The Colossians needed to understand that the old inferior ritual had been superseded by something far superior.

With A Circumcision Made Without Hands, By Putting Off The Body Of Flesh In The Circumcision Of Christ – The badge of belonging to the new covenant was not an external cutting of the flesh, but a spiritual circumcision of the heart (Heb. 8:7-13). Only the voluntary surrender of one’s own heart could bring him into the covenant. No one else could do it to him or for him; he must himself choose to put off the ways of the flesh and put on Christ.

V. 12 And You Were Buried With Him In Baptism – Notice how closely connected are the “circumcision of Christ” and the burial in baptism. Both are a putting off of the old flesh (Rom. 6:1-6) and are an initiation into Christ (Gal. 3:27). The baptismal water holds no mystic cleansing power, but initiation into Christ does have that power. Baptism is an integral part of that initiation (Acts 2:38; Eph. 4:5).

In Which You Were Also Raised With Him Through Faith In The Working Of God – It is only through faith that baptism takes on any significance. As an act of faith, it is man’s way of saying “yes” to the gospel. Baptism is simply the response of faith—the response specified by God.

Paul’s main emphasis here lies in the fact that Christians are also “raised with him” (Rom. 6:4-11). This fact provides the ethical basis for the Christian life (3:1) and the foundation of thought for most of the rest of the epistle.

Who Raised Him From The Dead – As in Eph. 1:19-21, the supreme demonstration of the “working of God” is the resurrection.

V. 13 And You, Who Were Dead In Trespasses – Their “mis-steps” had produced separation from God (1:21), which is spiritual death (Eph. 2:5).

And The Uncircumcision Of Your Flesh – They had not “put off the body of flesh” by surrender to Christ.

God Made Alive Together With Him, Having Forgiven Us All Our Trespasses – God “freely forgave”

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(*charizomai*) our sins when we were hopelessly dead in them (Eph. 2:4-8). Just as he raised Jesus from the tomb, he gave us new spiritual life.

V. 14 Having Canceled The Bond Which Stood Against Us – There was a “bond” against us, an enormous “handwritten acknowledgement of debt.” God “canceled” this by “erasing or wiping it out.”

With Its Legal Demands – The great debt was our failure to live up to all the ordinances and requirements of the law. Neither by the Law of Moses nor by any human set of laws could human behavior be successfully regulated.

This He Set Aside, Nailing It To The Cross – Christ paid our enormous I.O.U. when he died on the cross. He abolished the law of commandments (Eph. 2:15) forever abolishing law as the means of salvation.

Christ did not die at Calvary, nailing the law to the cross, only to bind his followers with another set of legal requirements just like the old. The New Testament must not be perverted into a legal code-book containing hundreds of written (or implied) requirements for salvation.

V. 15 He Disarmed The Principalities And Powers – Satan and his hosts (1:16; 2:10) had only one real weapon against God’s children: accusation. (The name “Devil” means “accuser.”) God “stripped” our foes of this weapon by satisfying all claims against us with the sacrifice of his sinless Son.

And Made A Public Example Of Them, Triumphant Over Them In Him – The picture is that of a victory parade with the enemies driven in humiliation and defeat before the chariot of the Conqueror. The Colossians should not worship angels (v. 18), but the One to whom all angels (even “principalities and powers”) are subject.

Let No One Disqualify You (2:16-23)

16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or what regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. 17 These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on 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.

20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” 22 (referring to things which all perish as they are used), according to

human precepts and doctrines? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of devotion and self-abasement and severity to the body, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh.

V. 16 Therefore Let No One Pass Judgment On You – It is one thing to voluntarily give up “eating meat or drinking wine or anything that makes your brother stumble” (Rom. 14:21). It is quite a different thing to allow anyone to put you into subjection to their legalistic judgments. The Christian must give up his rights for the good of a weaker brother; but he must staunchly refuse to give up his rights to a would-be religious dictator.

Questions Of Food Or Drink Or With Regard To A Festival Or A New Moon Or A Sabbath – These were typical Jewish concerns, revealing the Jewish flavor of the Colossian heresy. Certain foods were forbidden to all Jews (Lev. 11), and wine was forbidden to Nazarites (Num. 6:3). Special sacrifices and other observances were made at the yearly feasts (“festivals”), the beginning of each month (“new moon”), and on the Sabbath. The Christian must not become subject to these (Gal. 4:10-11).

V. 17 These Are Only A Shadow Of What Is To Come; But The Substance Belongs To Christ. – The rituals and sacrifices of the old law were predictive in nature. They were the shadow (Heb. 8:5; 10:1) which appeared before the substance (“body”) could be seen. Like a shadow, they had no independent reality or purpose apart from the body.

V. 18 Let No One Disqualify You – This was an athletic term for the decision of the umpire to disqualify a runner and thus deprive him of the prize. Since it was God who “qualified” (1:12) the Colossians for their share in the glory, they should not think any man had the right to disqualify them.

Insisting On Self-Abasement – What follows is a list of some specific teachings of the Colossian heresy. “Self-abasement” was elaborate “humility,” especially as expressed in fasting. Fasting may be beneficial to special seasons of prayer, but it can never be urged on Christians as a requirement of God.

Worship Of Angels – Following the close of the Old Testament, there was much Jewish speculation about angels; but the actual worship of angels was foreign to the Jews. This part of the heresy was a pagan contribution.

Taking His Stand On Visions – This phrase is difficult to translate, as may be seen by the variety of renderings in English versions. Perhaps it had to do with the “mystery religions” of the ancient East. A key part of this phrase was used in these cults for “entering the sanctuary and seeing the secret.” Whatever it was, the Colossian heretics were trying to promote some kind of special knowledge or experience known only to the elite.

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Puffed Up Without Reason By His Sensuous Mind – “Knowledge puffs up” (I Cor. 8:1), especially when that knowledge is a product of “the mind of his flesh.”

V. 19 Not Holding Fast To The Head – Parts of the body in Colossae had detached themselves from the head, taking inflated pride in their private religious experiences. This was the fundamental problem of the Colossian heresy.

From Whom The Whole Body, Nourished And Knit Together – As long as the body holds fast to the head, it is nourished (“abundantly supplied” as in Phil. 1:19) and knit together (“diverse parts brought into harmony” as in Col. 2:2). The body is tightly united with joints and ligaments (Eph. 4:16), so that the parts must not separate from one another.

A Growth That Is From God – Parts that are separated from the Head cannot grow. They may have an appearance of growth by some human perspective, but they will not have the growth that comes from God.

V. 20 If With Christ You Died To The Elemental Spirits Of The Universe – As in verse 8, the word “spirits” is wrong. The “elemental things” to which the Christian has died are the rudimentary principles of law. No longer should the Christian submit to the legal demands (2:14) of self-earned righteousness. Because of Calvary, he is dead to legal decrees.

Why Do You Live As If You Still Belonged To The World? – They would belong to the world by trying to invent their own religion and by working their way to heaven. Thus, they would have denied that they belonged to God and that he had freely given (2:13) them salvation in Christ.

Why Do You Submit To Regulations – Literally, “why do you allow yourselves to be dogmatized?” Regulations and restrictions may be a necessary evil in other parts of society, but they are intolerable as the basis of right standing with God.

“Do Not Handle, Do Not Taste, Do Not Touch” – This was the three-point sermon of the Colossian false teacher. This was the secret route to heaven, the escape from the depravity of the flesh. Stifle yourself and leash your desires!

The Christian, to the contrary, gets a new self and puts to death the old desires. Inward renewal makes outward restraint unnecessary.

V. 22 (Referring To Things Which All Perish As They Are Used) – Holy diet is not the essence of righteousness. Jesus dealt with those who taught human “precepts and doctrines” (same words here as in Mark 7:7) by teaching that food merely passes on through and out of the body (Mark 7:15-19). Defilement is not a matter of the diet, but of the heart.

V. 23 These Have Indeed An Appearance Of Wisdom – The acts of asceticism may seem very holy and may carry the “repute of wisdom.”

In Promoting Rigor Of Devotion – This could also be translated “voluntary will-worship.” It refers to a self-imposed asceticism in which one’s own will power is exalted as worthy of admiration.

The Christian ascetics of the fourth and fifth centuries were the marvels of the ancient world. They could subsist for years on bread and water, voluntarily chained in caves, never uttering a single sound. Their will power was phenomenal, but what was really accomplished?

Self-Abasement – This is the same word as in verse 18, carrying special emphasis on fasting.

Severity To The Body – Being “unsparing” to the body. The body, of course, was evil. Therefore, it deserved to be mercilessly abused.

But They Are Of No Value In Checking The Indulgence Of The Flesh – Asceticism often backfires. Instead of freeing a person from his flesh, it actually focuses his attention all the more on fleshly concerns. He is so busy concentrating his will power against his flesh that he cannot set his mind on things above (3:2).

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What is philosophy? Is it always bad?
2. What is the special significance of the word “bodily” in verse 9?
3. What was the purpose of circumcision in the Old Testament?
4. How are baptism and circumcision similar? How are they different?
5. What was nailed to the cross with Jesus?
6. When God “disarmed” the principalities and powers, what did he take away from them?

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7. What was the Colossian heresy? Make a list of its direct teachings from verses 8, 16, 18, 21, and 23.
8. Where can you find parallels to these false teachings in the world today?
9. What is the picture behind the words “Let no one disqualify you”?
10. What is “rigor of devotion” in verse 23?

Lesson 10

(3:1-17)

Seek The Things Above (3:1-4)

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 hid with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

V. 1 If Then You Have Been Raised With Christ – These words parallel the words of 2:20, “if with Christ you died.” The earlier verse emphasized the negative aspects of death; this verse emphasizes the positive aspects of new life. This verse introduces a strong moral exhortation: If you have been raised to a new life, then live like it!

As most commentators note, the imagery of baptism may be seen in these verses. The penitent believer dies to the old life and is raised to the new (Rom. 6:1-7). Baptism vividly pictures this burial and resurrection.

Seek The Things That Are Above – The present tense of this command makes the action continuous: “seek and keep on seeking.” The Christian fixes his eyes on a heavenly goal (Heb. 11:10; 12:2) and presses on toward that goal (Phil. 3:14).

Where Christ Is, Seated At the Right Hand Of God – The Old Testament prophesied that the Messiah

would sit at God’s right hand (Ps. 110:1), the supreme position of shared authority. This important concept was central in apostolic preaching (Acts 2:33; 5:33; 7:55, 56) and in the epistles (Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; I Pet. 3:22, Rev. 3:21).

V. 2 Set Your Minds On Things That Are Above – Paul did not want the Colossian Christians to turn from the extreme of asceticism, condemned in 2:21-23, to the extreme of total permissiveness. The Christian who has been set free from the legalistic demands of the law must not think he is exempt from all moral restraints and can indulge himself at will.

Christian morality is the product of adopting a new way of thinking. The Christian has a new “mind” or attitude (as in Phil. 2:5 and 3:15) which sees things from God’s frame of reference. The more the Christian’s mind is attuned with the mind of God, the less the Christian needs external restraints. He is free to do whatever he wants because his “wants” are the “wants” of God.

Not On Things That Are On Earth – The attitudes to be avoided are specified in verses 5 to 11, the attitudes to be adopted are listed in verses 12 to 17.

V. 3 For You Have Died – Conversion from the old life, climaxed in baptism, was already a past reality for them. Therefore, Paul’s exhortation to them was this: “You have died—now live like it!”

And Your Life Is Hid With Christ In God – The Christian has died to the present world; his life belongs to God’s world. The words of a hymn by John Newton aptly comment on this line:

Rejoice, believer, in the Lord,
Who makes your cause His own;
The hope that’s founded on His word
Can ne’er be overthrown.

Though many foes beset your road,
And feeble is your arm,
Your life is hid with Christ in God,
Beyond the reach of harm.

V. 4 When Christ Who Is Our Life Appears – Christ is our life. He is the source, sustainer, and redeemer of our lives. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us (Gal. 2:20). Henceforth, to live is Christ (Phil. 1:21). We live each day in the confident expectation that Christ will suddenly return from heaven and take us to our home in glory (Phil. 3:21; II Cor. 5:1).

Then You Also Will Appear With Him In Glory – When Christ returns, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (I John 3:2). He will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body (Phil. 3:21), and we shall dwell with him in “unapproachable light,” full of glory.