

Lesson 7 – Colossians 2:4-10

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Review

The apostle Paul is writing a letter to the church at Colossae – a church he does not know and one that is facing heretical attacks on the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. This heresy combined errant ideas with the truth of Christianity. Its elements included a need for a special knowledge available only to a select few, a denial of the deity and saving work of Christ, Jewish legalism, worship of angels, mysticism, and asceticism.

1:1-2 – Paul greeted the church

1:3-8 – Paul prayed, giving thanks for God’s work demonstrated in their lives.

1:9-14 – Paul prayed, asking God for continued growth and steadfastness in their Lord.

1:15-18 – Paul refuted the heresy that denied the deity of Christ.

1:19-23 – Paul refuted the heresy that denied the sufficiency of Christ’s saving work.

1:24-2:3 – Paul presented various aspects ministry God had given him. The heart of ministry is joy which we are able to possess in the direst circumstances by walking in the Spirit. Ministry is difficult and involves suffering. The goal of ministry is to fully preach the gospel. The method of ministry is to “proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ”. The power for ministry comes from the Holy Spirit. Finally, the concern of ministry is that hearts would be strengthened.

Today, we start looking at some of the other errant teaching at Colossae. Paul presents the preeminent Christ as supreme and sufficient over human wisdom and philosophy.

The Supremacy of Christ Over Human Wisdom and Philosophy (2:4-10)

1. The danger of false teachers (2:4)

⁴I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument.

⁴I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. (ESV)

Paul has been seeking to give the Colossians sound theology (specifically, the person and work of Christ and the riches found in an intimate relationship with Him) so they are able to protect themselves from false teachers. Now he explains the method that the false teachers employ.

The Gnostic false teachers were attempting to lead the Colossian believers’ minds away from the “simplicity and purity of *devotion* to Christ”.

²For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you *as* a pure virgin. ³But I am afraid that, **as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of *devotion* to Christ.** (2 Cor 11:2-4)

Paul had just stated that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). “Treasures” refers to the place in which precious things are collected and laid up. Those precious things are wisdom and knowledge. They are only found in Christ and not in the philosophies of Gnosticism.

Paul has been telling the Colossians about Christ and His preeminence so that no one will “delude” them. “Delude” means to deceive by false reasoning. It is literally to reason beside or alongside. If the target is the truth, there is something alongside the truth that looks very much like the truth but is a lie. It is in the present tense meaning that the false teachers are continually trying to delude. The only other NT use is in James.

²²But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who **delude** themselves. ²³For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22-25)

“Persuasive arguments” is a single Greek word referring to enticing words. These are plausible, but false arguments. The word was used of the law court and refers to the lawyer’s persuasive speech and its power to influence an unjust verdict which could enable the criminal to escape his just punishment.

What does this look like? There are infinite ways. This can take on any form when a false teacher brings some plausible argument alongside the truth so that it looks like the truth. In context here, any time someone is messing theologically with the person of Christ (his deity, humanity, or both) or Christ’s sufficiency to save and sanctify, they are deluding.

❖ **Is your mind so saturated with the word of God that delusion is clear?**

2. The joy of true ministers (2:5)

⁵For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

⁵For 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. (ESV)

“Absent in body, with you in spirit” is a familiar thought from Paul regarding His beloved local bodies of Christ.

¹⁷But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short while—**in person, not in spirit**—were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. ¹⁸For we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, more than once—and *yet* Satan hindered us. (1 Thess 2:17-18)

³For I, on my part, though **absent in body but present in spirit**, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. ⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I **with you in spirit**, with the power of our Lord Jesus, (1 Cor 5:3-4)

Though they had never met and at this time and were separated by ~1000 miles, the believers at Colossae held a special place in Paul’s heart. They were united in the body of Christ by virtue of their union with Christ. In addition, Paul’s ministry philosophy, method, and goal were to present everyone he had an opportunity to minister to “complete in Christ”. That included the distant Colossians.

❖ **When you are away from VBC or your growth group, do you feel this way?**

Paul was rejoicing (continually) in the Colossians' good discipline and stability of their faith. This is the joy of the mature servant of Christ. It is one thing to rejoice about your physical or spiritual offspring (3 John 4).

⁴I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth. (3 John 4)

However, Paul was rejoicing about the growth and steadfastness of those he had not met. Again, this is not new for Paul.

¹⁹For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. (Rom 16:19)

“Good discipline” described the orderly array of soldiers with the line being unbroken and intact. There was no breach in the line as they were being attacked by deluding persuasive arguments.

“Stability” is used only here in the NT and refers to a solid body that has been made firm, strong and unchanging. One commentator notes that this is also a military term indicating a solid front or close phalanx. Figuratively, it describes the state of firm inner strength, steadfastness, constancy. The line was holding against the deluding persuasive arguments.

These are the descriptions brought to Paul by Epaphras. Individually and collectively the church was holding up against the deluding persuasive arguments. For this Paul rejoices. But he is also concerned so he is sending his letter.

❖ From where do you derive your greatest joy, things of the Spirit or of the flesh?

3. The result of true saving faith (2:6-7)

⁶Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, *so* walk in Him, ⁷having been firmly rooted *and now* being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, *and* overflowing with gratitude.

⁶Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (ESV)

The warning against being deluded by persuasive arguments is followed by Paul's rejoicing to see their “good discipline and the stability of [their] faith in Christ”. But don't sit on your laurels. Now comes an exhortation to advance in their walk with Christ.

“Have received” means to receive to oneself what is imparted or delivered over. The Colossians did not receive some hidden knowledge human wisdom or philosophy. They had received the preeminent Christ. Paul makes that clear here by saying that they had received “Christ Jesus the Lord”.

They had received Christ Jesus the Lord and all the truth about His person, His work, and life in Him. Now, “walk in Him” as a way of life. Don't start with Christ then move to human wisdom and philosophy. Don't start with Christ then attempt to advance in sanctification in your own strength. Don't start with Christ then add something else.

Four participles are provided that further explain the imperative “walk in Him”. All but the last of these are in the passive voice indicating God is doing the work to the Colossians. Remember though, there is the “cooperation” aspect of spiritual growth (Phil 2:12-13).

“Firmly rooted” means to become stable, strengthened with roots and figuratively to be firmly fixed, thoroughly grounded. It is in the passive voice, by some called the “Divine passive voice”, indicating that this rooting had been done to them by God. The perfect tense indicates past completed action with continuing effect and thus pictures the initial “rooting” the moment we trusted Christ with the result that we continue to be rooted because the truly saved always continue (persevere). Since the Colossians are exhorted to walk “in Him”, “firmly rooted” suggests stability, nourishment, and life are derived from Christ Jesus the Lord not from human wisdom and philosophy.

“Being built up” literally means to build upon something already built and is used figuratively meaning to build up spiritually, to edify, or to promote spiritual growth. It is in the present tense indicating it is continually occurring and in the passive voice picturing God as the one doing the building up. The building up is not in human wisdom and philosophy, but “in Him”, in “Christ Jesus the Lord”.

“Established” means to make firm or reliable so as to warrant security and inspire confidence. Again, it is in the passive voice indicating God is the source of the establishing and in the present tense indicating an ongoing process.

God has “firmly rooted” the believer in Christ Jesus the Lord. He continues the “building up” process upon the foundation of Christ as the believer allows the words of Christ to richly dwell in her/him (Col 3:16; 1 Pet 2:2), strives to walk in the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), strives to put off sin and put on righteousness (Col 3:8-10), is involved in intimate fellowship (Heb 10:24-25), etc. The result is the believer is “established” which provides confidence we are His, we are truly saved. As we see all of God’s work in our hearts, we are “overflowing with gratitude”.

“Overflowing” means great quantities of, copiously supplied, super abounding. It is the present tense meaning it is a habit of the believer’s life and in the active voice. This is the response to God’s work in our life. The believer who chooses to see God’s work in and through her/him will “abound in thanksgiving” (ESV).

❖ **Do you see God’s work in and through you? Are you abounding in thankfulness?**

4. The deficiency of philosophy (2:8)

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

⁸See 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. (ESV)

“See to it” means to watch, see. But in the context of danger (in this case spiritual danger) means “look out!”, “beware!”, “watch out!”, “take heed!”. It is a command, it is a habitual lifestyle, it demands a choice of the will. The only way believers can continually do this is by Spirit-filling.

“Takes you captive” is only used here in Scripture and means to lead away those conquered into slavery or captivity. This is the opposite of what Christ does to His disciples.

³¹So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; ³²and you will know the truth, and **the truth will make you free.**” (John 8:31-32)

Beware! You are free in Christ. See to it that you are not overcome with anything other than the treasures that are in Christ. Don’t give up the true treasures for something false. Paul says something similar to the Galatians.

¹It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. (Gal 5:1)

❖ **Are you constantly on the lookout for lies that are seeking to take you away from reliance on Christ?**

“Philosophy” is literally a love of wisdom and is only used here in the NT.

“Everything that had to do with theories about God and the world and the meaning of human life was called ‘philosophy’ at that time, not only in pagan schools, but also in the Jewish schools of the Greek cities.” (Adolf Schlatter in “The Church in the New Testament Period”)

It is preceded with a definite article indicating Paul had “the” philosophy in mind. That is then most likely, the Gnostic philosophy that denied the preeminence of Christ.

Bible scholars note that Greek phrasing indicates that “empty deception” describes “philosophy”.

“Empty” means empty, vain, fruitless, without usefulness or success, false, fallacious. It is that in which there is nothing of truth or reality. It describes not only that which will not succeed but also that which has no purpose.

“Deception” means false impression by appearance, statement, or influence; that which is seducing or leading astray by persuasion or false promises; that which causes someone to have misleading or erroneous views concerning the truth.

The false teachers at Colossae considered their philosophy to be true, yet the apostle Paul dismisses it as worthless misleadings, empty deception.

Where does this philosophy which is empty deception come from? Two sources are given.

First, “the tradition of men”. “Tradition” is used 13 times in the NT and means that which is delivered, that which is passed along by teaching. It is used both negatively (Matt 15:3; 6; Mark 7:3; 5; 8; 9; 13; Gal 1:14; Col 2:8) and positively (2 Thess 3:6; 2 Thess 2:15; 1 Cor 11:2) depending on the context. Negatively it is used to refer to man-made doctrines, teaching, or rules which take the place of Scripture. These traditions “invalidate the word of God” (Matt 15:6). Positively it is used to refer to inspired apostolic teaching – i.e. Scripture. Here it is human tradition which is contrary to the word of God. It has no higher authority than the people who make it up. Not so with God’s word.

Second is the “elementary principles of the world”. “Elementary principles” describes something orderly in arrangement, e.g. one of a row and hence a component or element. It came to refer to the letters of the alphabet, and then to any elementary knowledge. In most of its uses, it denotes an elementary or fundamental principle in a subject or discipline. It refers to the first principles or basic building blocks of something.

³So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the **elemental things** (elementary principles – ESV) of the world. (Gal 4:3)

⁹But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless **elemental things** (elementary principles – ESV), to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? (Gal 4:9)

¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the **elementary principles** (basic principles – ESV) of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. (Heb 5:12)

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the **elements** (heavenly bodies – ESV) will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. ¹¹Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, ¹²looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the **elements** (heavenly bodies – ESV) will melt with intense heat! (2 Pet 3:10-12)

The Greek word that the NASB translates “elementary principles” also has a second meaning and could be translated “elementary spirits” as does the ESV and NIV. In this regard it would mean the elemental spirits of the world, either supposed emanations from God or the spirit beings associated with the stars and planets (similar to astrology).

Context determines word meaning. Here it seems best to view the word as “elementary principles” describing the Colossian false teacher’s philosophy as basic or rudimentary and thus reverting away from the true, complete knowledge found only in Christ. The Gnostic philosophy is immature and base compared to the treasures found in Christ.

- ❖ **What might be some of these “philosophies” in the modern church?**
- ❖ **Are there “philosophies” in your life that move you away from the treasures found in Christ?**
- ❖ **Are there “philosophies” in your life that are opposed to the supremacy and sufficiency of salvation and sanctification in Christ?**

The philosophy through which the false teachers are attempting to take the Colossians captive is empty deception, it is handed down tradition – not Scripture, it is base and immature – not the treasures found in Christ. This philosophy is not according to Christ.

5. The superiority and supremacy of Christ, again (2:9-10)

⁹For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, ¹⁰and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;

⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. (ESV)

Paul bookends this section which addresses Christ's superiority over human wisdom and philosophy with Christ. He focusses on the superior, preeminent Christ. The point is clear: have your heart/mind so focused and preoccupied with Christ that you cannot be deluded, you cannot be taken captive, no philosophy can compete with Him and the riches of a life IN Him. Whatever the philosophy of salvation or sanctification, it is nothing compared to Christ because He is God.

“In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form”, therefore, He is preeminent, He is supreme, He is sufficient. The complete (fullness) of the Godhead dwells in the human Christ. Christ is 100% God and 100% man. The theological doctrine that explains how Jesus is 100% God and 100% man is called the “hypostatic union”.

Though prior to the incarnation Christ was eternally God, He now possesses both fully human and divine natures. The concept of the hypostatic union (the union of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ) is one of the most difficult concepts to comprehend in theology. The hypostatic union is the unique combination of true humanity and undiminished deity that has existed since the incarnation. These two natures (divine and human) exist without confusion or loss of separate identity and they were inseparably united without transfer of attributes. The Second Person of the Trinity, the pre-incarnate Christ came and took to Himself a human nature and remains forever undiminished deity and perfect humanity united in one person forever.

When Christ came, He took on an additional nature, a human nature; He did not simply dwell in a human person. The result of the union of the two natures is the theanthropic Person (the God-man, Jesus Christ). The two natures of Christ are inseparably united without mixture or loss of separate identity. He remains forever the God-man, fully God and fully man, two distinct natures in the one Person forever.

Though Christ sometimes operated in the sphere of His humanity and in other cases in the sphere of His deity, in all cases what He did and what He was could be attributed to His one Person. Even though it is evident that there were two natures in Christ, he is never considered a dual personality. A summary of these elements:

- 1) Christ has two distinct natures: humanity and deity.
- 2) There is no mixture or intermingling of the two natures.
- 3) In Christ, the one Person, the two natures are inseparably united without confusion.
- 4) This unity of the two natures is permanent.
- 5) Although He has two natures, Christ is one Person.

Because Christ is God, there is nothing too difficult for Him. Therefore, in Him we have “been made complete”. Prior to Christ you were not complete. Now in Christ you are spiritually complete with a present ongoing effect or result. The believer is “in Christ” and therefore has been made complete and is living now in a state of completeness. Now, just like at the point of salvation, we need nothing else. We have all the resources we need for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3).

²Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; ³seeing that **His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness**, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. ⁴For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. (2 Pet 1:2-4)

❖ Do you live as if you have been made complete?

Not only are believers complete, but Christ “is the head over all rule and authority”. He is God and He is head over all the spiritual realm. Paul has just summarized again his points made in 1:15-19. He is first; He is supreme; He is preeminent. Christ is not below anything. He is not subject to any human wisdom or philosophy. Therefore, don’t be taken captive by anything other than Christ.

Conclusion

Paul continues his attack the Colossian false teaching that denied the person and work of Christ focusing the attack on philosophy which is empty deception and is according to the tradition of men and the elementary principles of the world, rather than Christ. He is looking to make sure the Colossians are not deluded with persuasive argument. Paul’s heart is with the Colossians and he doesn’t want them to be pulled away from the treasures that come from a relationship with the God-man, Christ Jesus. My prayer is that we are convicted by that in our own life as well.

Additional Study

1. Read 2 Corinthians 11:2-4 and ask God to show you things in your life that may be leading you astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. List those things out and commit to turn from them.
2. In your time of prayer, ask God to give you a list of people for you to pray for. Rejoice for any work of God you see in their lives. Pray the prayer of Paul for salvation or growth for these people.
3. Read Galatians 4:9. What weak and worthless things in your life are you desiring that may enslave you?
4. Think through your relationships and activities. Are there any that have sway over you and are pulling you away from Christ? What should be done with those?