

Paul's Letter to the Colossians

Messages and study aids by Timothy Darling

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Introduction

These messages were presented at Norma Mennonite Church, the Summer of 2008, and October 2012 accompanied by a specially prepared text of the Letter to the Colossians. Inspired by the work of the Books of the Bible editors, my wife Dawn and I prepared a presentation of the book, designed on letterhead. In that spirit we left out all chapter and verse numbers, since Paul, in writing the letter did not include them. Thus, when the passages in this collection are included, they have no reference numbers.

However, Paul had no such concerns. He was writing to his friends who would read his writing as a personal note, intended for them. We may read it the same way. However, since as I am preaching, I also have the text pasted into my message text, it is included as I saw it while I was preaching.

Those technicalities aside, we can read Colossians as a personal letter from our friend Paul in prison. Though he is beset by hardship, he is encouraging us to abandon extraneous influences, entangling sin, and to live holy lives. Holiness is defined by our intention and motion to live life according to the integrity and love Jesus taught – in every arena in our lives – in the church and in our homes.

Paul's words to the home are not very popular these days, but then, divorce is more popular than ever. Is there a chance that we as the church can consider whether divorce is so prevalent because Paul's advice to the home is not? It's just a suggestion.

In reading this, remember that the Colossian church was quite functional, and this was a guide to going further and higher. May we all do the same.

Colossians

The Church at Colosse was not generally a troubled church. Unlike Corinth, they had a fairly good sense of what they should be doing. Paul is calling them to an ever higher spirituality, to do even better than they are already doing.

1:1-2	Greeting	
1:3-13	Thanksgiving and Prayer for wisdom, knowledge and understanding	(3-8) Thank God, hope has given rise to faith and love
		(9-13) A prayer for the Church's strength
1:21-2:23	Paul's intention to make the truth of Christ real to the Colossians	(1:21-2:5) Paul's work in the mystery of the Gospel
		(2:6-23) Jesus' power over other religious traditions
3:1-4:6	Encouragements to live in submission to Christ instead of submission to human systems	(3:1-11) live a righteous life
		(3:12-17) love each other
		(3:18-4:1) keep godly households
		(4:2-6) pray for Paul
4:7-18	Closing greetings and blessing	

Being Smart about God's Will

Colossians 1:9–12

The Colossians had experienced hope. The Gospel delivered to them had presented them with the promise of the kingdom and that promise had given them hope, which in turn gave rise to active faith and love. This faith and love were more than mushy spiritual feelings, they were profound movers in their lives, causing them to behave toward others in certain ways.

For this reason we also, from the day we heard about you, have not ceased praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may live worthily of the Lord and please him in all respects -- bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for the display of all patience and steadfastness, joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light. *(Colossians 1:9-12 NET)*

So when we come to Paul's statement "For this reason," he is speaking of the profound improvement in the lives of his readers. They have become people who are actively involved in expressing their hope through loving others and through communicating this same hope, giving the gospel to those who need it.

Because of your faith and love and the thankfulness I feel, I pray for you.

Do you pray for the people you are thankful for?

What does Paul pray?

It is important to notice that the next sentence in this passage is very long. This is the way Paul wrote. In some translations it is broken into shorter English sentences, because that's the way English is written. But Paul wrote in long sentences.

Long sentences are good for expressing and showing the relationships between very complex ideas. In order to understand a long sentence, we have to go over it slowly and break it down. What is Paul praying for? He is ...

asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will

When Paul asks for this he asks for God to do it in a certain way:

in spiritual wisdom and understanding

These are thinking words. Paul wants the Colossians to be smart, not just intellectually, but spiritually. This is an important distinction, because a person can have knowledge. He can memorize an encyclopedia, but that does not mean he understands what he knows.

He can have an understanding of it. He can know Einstein's theory of Relativity. He can even understand it so well that he knows how to make a hydrogen bomb. This does not make him wise.

A truly smart person:

- Has facts (knowledge)
- Has understanding (knows what the facts mean)
- Has wisdom (can foresee the implications of applying his mind to certain situations and exercises it with moral integrity).

Hitler had knowledge - he knew genetics, he even had understanding - he could motivate people with his facts using psychology

But he was not wise.

Paul wants the Colossians to have all three.

What is the point behind being truly, spiritually smart?

When we are truly, spiritually smart, we have the ability to please God. We become people of high value.

This sounds bad because everyone has the same intrinsic value. We are all made in God's image.

But are we worthy of it?

The short answer is no. We sin, we are fallen. But we can be worthy of it, not by any effort of our own, but by God's grace. That is why it is a matter of prayer for Paul. When we are invested with value from God we gain the ability to please Him.

All guys know what this means. We have all been in the position of wanting to please a woman of whom we were unworthy. We may want to buy her a gift.

So we draw on our vast experience and the advice of other people to know what kind of gift is best:

- It should not say the wrong thing
- It should express something about how we feel
- It should say something about how we perceive her

The problem is usually that we go about this first gift with too little information. We don't know what she likes or what makes her smile. We are not the best person to be buying her a gift. We are not that likely to completely please her with the present.

The main thing that can change the situation is if she gets us up to speed. She sits us down and explains that she doesn't actually like the brand of perfume we

bought because it gives her headaches and hives. She, instead, gives us a list of her favorites.

By paying close attention and using the knowledge she gives us with understanding and wisdom, we can please her and, ultimately be worthy of her. Well

Anyway, Paul is praying that the Colossians will have the opportunity to please God and to become, by His grace, worthy of Him as He reveals to them more and more of His will.

What does a person do who is smart about the will of God as it is revealed to him or her?

She does good deeds

This seems to go without saying. Those good deeds will not save a person. They don't make a person worthy of God. It is the natural outgrowth of doing the will of God.

What are good deeds?

In this spot, Paul doesn't say. It apparently goes without saying. He calls it bearing fruit, so it may be related to what he calls in another place, the fruit of the Spirit:

- You will be loving
- You will be joyful
- You will promote peace
- You will be patient
- You will be kind
- You will be "good"
- You will exercise faith
- You will be gentle
- You will be self controlled

Any deeds that are the outgrowths of these attitudes and dispositions are "good" deeds. is this you?

She knows God better

We did not just come full circle. Paul wants his readers to know God's will so that they can pursue knowing Him. What is the difference?

In the movie Wall Street. Michael Sheen plays against Michael Douglas. Douglas is a hard-hitting venture capitalist, rich, ruthless and aggressive.

Sheen is a wannabe. He wants to work for Douglas, He wants to know what he knows. He wants to be rich and powerful. But in order to do that, he has to get close to him.

So, he brings him a box of his favorite Cuban cigars and some valuable inside information.

Here's the point. He knows what Douglas wants, so he uses that information to get close to him so that he can learn more about what makes the man tick.

He does what the man wants

So he can get close to the man

As a person knows more about the will of God, he becomes more attracted to the God of the will. He learns and wants to learn about what is in God's heart. It opens up whole new venues to knowing God.

She will get spiritually stronger

This will show itself in patience and endurance. Who is stronger the man who can lift free weights or the man who can carry a car? It isn't just about having the ability, it is about being able to sustain the action.

- You can be insulted and put up with it.
- Can you love an insulting person?

- You can pray for 10 minutes.
- Can you pray for 10 minutes every day?

The beauty of it is that your strength will not find its source in you. It will find its source in the power of God.

Perhaps you've seen a person holding up the leaning tower of Pisa. The person looks very strong in the picture, bracing a multi-storey building. The thing that makes the picture fun, is the knowledge that it is not real.

The truth is that the tower is being held up by its own architecture and the forces of gravity on the foundation and the ground. It will not lean forever, but for now, it is an engineering marvel. What holds up the tower? Math holds up the tower, something bigger and more inscrutable than any person in any picture.

The person who is smart about the will of God has strength and patience that goes way beyond their natural ability. Their strength and patience is founded in God's mighty power. Being smart about God's will makes us into people who can take what this world and the Devil can dish out and keep taking it, because it is not about our own natural resources, but about knowing what God wants, pursuing it, and reaping the benefit of His power.

She is thankful

This is not about general gratitude for everyday blessings and the kindness of other people toward us. It is a deep thankfulness for something we have not even seen. It is thankful for something that so far only faith born of hope has revealed:

The ultimate inheritance we have in God's kingdom

It is thankfulness born of the knowledge that we do not deserve this great gift that we will someday receive in full. It is thankfulness to the loving and kind God who has qualified us for this incredible inheritance.

We are like Annie. We were poor orphan kids with no evidence of anything like a future. But the hope that we embrace and keep close to our hearts gives us faith to look long and hard till we find the Father who will give us everything. God is so much greater than Daddy Warbucks, but like Him, God is the one that comes through and makes us His own and gives us the keys to the kingdom.

It is a gratitude born of faith ... after all, without faith it is impossible to please God.

We can be that person

- The person who does good deeds
- The person really, deeply and intimately knows God
- The person of strength and patience
- The person of gratitude even in the apparent absence of anything to be thankful for

That person is very clearly worthy of God's great grace. That person is very clearly pleasing to God.

How can we be that person?

By being smart about God's will - understanding it and following through with wisdom.

So, what is God's will?

Specifically? For you? I don't know!

Wait! What good is this whole message if we cannot get to the root of it?

I want to be that person who is characterized by all that incredibly attractive spiritual maturity. I want the opportunity to exercise understanding and wisdom about God's will, but how can I do that if I don't know what His will is?

You can, but I cannot tell you what it is.

Only God can.

So what can you do?

Paul saw this knowledge as the next logical step between where the Colossians were and where they were capable of going. What they were, was a faithful and loving group whose main motivation was the hope of the gospel.

Are you letting the gospel instill hope in you? Does that hope move you to love those around you? Does it move you to act in faith that everything Jesus promised is going to happen?

So ...

Step one: Inundate yourself with the gospel and learn what Jesus is promising there.

Step two: let the promises of Jesus so fill your life that they overflow in love toward others and faithfulness to God. You should be able to see and say what practical shape that love and faithfulness takes. A person who is not at this point is not yet ready for God's will.

If you are that person, then you are in a position to become the person Paul describes, the person who is smart about God's will, once you know what it is, which brings us to:

Step three: Pray

It's what Paul says at the beginning of the paragraph.

we ... have not ceased praying for you and asking
God to fill you with the knowledge of his will
(Colossians 1:9 NET)

This is powerful spiritual territory. This is the "personal"
part in your "personal relationship with God." This is
intimately connected with the prayer Jesus gave us to
pray:

Your kingdom come

Your will be done

On earth as it is in heaven

You are the kingdom, and you are also the vehicle for
God's will to be done here. And His will is only found
through prayer.

Do you pray?

How much?

How often?

Paul said, he never ceased praying for this for it.

Do you pray it for your loving and faithful friends?

Do you know His will yet? If you don't, keep praying.

Do this, this week. Every day when you have some
kind of time with God, make a list

"My love for others today was demonstrated in ..."

"My faithfulness to God was demonstrated in ..."

If you can answer those two questions, then pray for
progressively longer every day to know what God
wants from you, personally.

If you can do it for a week, you can do it longer

If you can do it longer, you can make it a habit

If you can make it a habit, you can do it without
stopping

As He answers your prayer He will give you
knowledge, understanding and wisdom

And He will make you into that person, pleasing Him,
worthy of His calling.

Who is Jesus? Who are You?

Colossians 1:13 – 23

The passage answers two questions:

- Most importantly, who is Jesus?
- Then, as a result of His identity, who am I?

The passage begins and ends with an assessment of who the Colossians were compared with who they have become.

But, by far the centerpiece and focal point of the passage is Paul's huge point of identifying Jesus.

He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, for all things in heaven and on earth were created by him -- all things, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions, whether principalities or powers -- all things were created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and all things are held together in him. He is the head of the body, the church, as well as the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead, so that he himself may become first in all things. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in the Son and through him to reconcile all things to himself by making peace through the blood of his cross -- through him, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

And you were at one time strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds, but now he has reconciled you by his physical body

through death to present you holy, without blemish, and blameless before him if indeed you remain in the faith, established and firm, without shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard. This gospel has also been preached in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become its servant.

(Colossians 1:13-23 NET)

Who was I?

As Paul introduces the passage, he describes the Colossians in terms of what they have been delivered from. Colosseae is a has-been city, small and eclipsed in significance by a "newer" city, Laodicea. However, Colosseae has had a proud history as a center of religion and philosophy.

Paul does not yet go into the ideas that cause Colossae problems. He just refers to them as having been delivered "from the power of darkness." He emphasizes that it was not just a matter of thoughts, but says,

you were at one time strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds

Paul doesn't go into it here. He does not explain what the evil deeds are. The fact that he can mention them in passing at the beginning of the letter and not expound means that the Colossians knew what deeds he was talking about. He did not need to explain.

That's the way it is with us. If you are like me, when your mother or dad sat you down and said, "I know what you did." I would not be inclined so much to believe immediately that they were wrong, as I would wonder, "which time? How do they know?"

The sin in our lives makes us prisoners of the darkness of fear and doubt. The things we do that are wrong are not all simply mistakes. They grow out of minds that have been conditioned in an evil world and are assaulted by Satan. They come from hearts that are drawn away by sinful desires. Our sin whatever it is, is no surprise to us and we know how tenacious its hold on our lives was before we knew Jesus, and can still become.

But then Jesus comes into the picture

And who is He?

He is the image of the invisible God. What is that? How can you have an image of something that can't be seen? It is interesting to me, because of two facts:

We are made in God's image. In one sense, though certainly not in the same sense, we are the image of the invisible God. This is secondary, because of the method of our creation:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness"

(Genesis 1:26 NET)

The "us" in this introduction is the trinity God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this way, we are the image of both the Father and the Son. As much as we can be the image of God the Father and His Son, who was at the time invisible, so the Son is the image of the invisible Father.

Another phrase that comes to mind is something said by Jesus Himself in response to a question:

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be content." Jesus replied, "Have I been with you for so long, and you have not known me, Philip?"

The person who has seen me has seen the Father!
How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?

(John 14:8-9 NET)

It is as if Jesus is saying: If the Father could be seen,
He would look like Me.

Paul is forceful in his identification of Jesus with the
Creator God, not just as His Son, but as being one and
the same with Him. Paul calls him "the firstborn over all
creation,"

Then, in order to avoid misunderstanding Paul says
exactly what he means:

all things in heaven and on earth were created by
him whether

- visible or invisible,
- thrones or dominions,
- principalities or powers --

all things were created through him and for him.

In other parts of the book we are told about the
spiritual confusion that the Colossians experienced, no
doubt, brought on by the confluence of pagan religions
and philosophies in their society. So Paul makes it
clear that nothing, whether physical, societal or
spiritual exists without the power of Jesus. He is the
Creator.

This section of Scripture is vitally important. The whole
teaching of the trinity draws incredible strength from
this passage. When you are through with this passage,
if you are at all familiar with the first part of Genesis,
you can only conclude that Paul taught:

Jesus is God

Paul in unity with the other apostles presented Him in this light:

The Word was with God in the beginning. All things were created by him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created.

(John 1:2-3 NET)

Or, as Paul put it here

He himself is before all things and all things are held together in him.

One of the big sticking points for people over Christianity is we say Jesus is the only way to God. We have no choice. Jesus claims to be much more than that. He is God. How can we assume there is another way to God except Jesus, when Jesus, who is God, gave us no other way?

But Paul isn't done. It is not enough to establish the relationship of Jesus with the Father. He continues by extending us into the relationship. Not only is Jesus:

the firstborn over all creation

He is

the firstborn from among the dead

Jesus, embodying the whole persona of God the Father came to this earth to suffer on the cross and die. He did this for a very specific and very special reason.

It is because of who we are without Him

- Prisoners of the power of darkness
- Strangers and enemies of God
- Full of evil deeds

All these things Paul said the Colossians were before they embraced the hope of the Gospel, all of us are from the time we are born. This is the reason for Jesus' death.

- If death is the natural consequence of being a sinful enemy of God, estranged through our bondage to sin.
- Then Jesus, the creator of the universe, the very image and essence of the Father, claimed our sin and took that death, in order to be reconciled to us.
- Then He rose from the dead and under His own bodily power, demonstrated His authority.

By right of creation, all humanity belongs to God

But humans rebelled and left Him

So by right of purchase those who will come to Christ belong to Him once again

- Imagine, the God described in the First Testament,
- The Messiah presented to us by Isaiah and the other prophets
- The power of life and death
- Power over all spiritual forces, no matter what they are

Are all wrapped up in Jesus. And He came to establish His own kingdom and to invite you ... all people ... to be a part.

He is the head of all believers who make up the church. It is His. He made it, and He bought it back.

By this power, what can I become?

Look again at the old you that has been:

- Strangers to God
- Enemies of God
- Sinful
- Prisoners of darkness

And look at the God you would be accepting:

- The Creator of everything
- The Sustainer of the universe
- The Savior of the Church
- Firstborn of creation
- Firstborn from the dead

Most of you have already accepted Him. God is making of you and wants to make of all of us a new version: You 2.0.

- Forgiven
- Reconciled
- Holy
- Without blemish
- Blameless

You can leave all the horrible things you've done in the past behind. You can clear up the barrier between you and God. You can actually be worthy to stand before Him unashamed. It isn't in your own power that you can do this, it is in the incomparable power of the one who created the heavens and the earth and who conquered death – all so He could bring you back to His father!

The kingdom of God is like a home

The father and son never could get along. The boy was constantly in trouble and the father was harsh in his attempts to correct him.

F: What have you done this time?

S: What difference does it make? You always take the other side no matter what I say.

F: If you weren't such a trouble maker, I might be able to trust you.

S: If you would trust me a little you might see that some of the "trouble" as you call it has another side to the story.

F: What other side? You constantly bring shame on yourself and your family with your irresponsible ways and shady friends.

The shouting match continues, but the words are unimportant, because neither is listening. It is a replay of a hundred quarrels. The son's accusations, the father's ultimatums reach fever pitch and the fight ends the way they all do. The son turns on his heels and walks out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

What the father does not know is that this time is different. His son does not come back in time for dinner. This is not new, it has happened a dozen times. He does not come home to sleep. This is not unique, he's done that a time or two. But the next day stretches on and the son does not come home. The mother sits down with the father during dinner.

M: What happened?

F: I don't know. He was being unreasonable as always.

M: What did you say?

F: I told him he was a trouble maker.

M: That wasn't very helpful.

F: I suppose it wasn't.

M: Where did he go?

F: He didn't say.

M: Maybe we should make some calls.

F: He'll be back.

M: Aren't you a little concerned?

F: He has friends. He'll be fine.

The father goes into his study and closes the door, the mother sits by the phone and begins calling her son's friends to see if she can find him. No one is willing to say that they have seen him. Yes, they've heard from him and he is angry. No, they don't know where he went. The mother bends her head, depressed and frustrated. She makes one more call, and this time it is right. Her son's friend puts him on the phone.

M: Son, come back home.

S: Why? So dad can berate me some more?

M: He doesn't mean it.

S: Then why does he say it so often?

M: He really loves you, I love you.

S: I really don't think I can put up with it any more.

M: Please.

S: No, mom. I love you, but He is too much. Good bye.

She hangs up the phone and is lost in thought. The father comes out of the study.

F: What's wrong?

M: I think I know where he is.

F: Where.

M: He is at that tall boy's house. The one that lives four blocks over, beyond the traffic light.

F: Is he coming home?

M: No, he is still angry with you.

F: What do you think we should do?

M: I'm going after him.

F: I'll come along.

The two leave and quickly walk a few blocks. At the traffic light in the glare of a street lamp near a coffee shop, they see him. He is standing with his back to them. The tall boy he is talking with sees them and points. He turns, looks with surprise and begins walking up the street, away from them.

The mother calls out: Wait!

He keeps walking.

She rushes after him. She does not see the truck bearing down on the intersection. The father shouts, the son turns, brakes whine, but it is too late. The tall boy at the corner pulls out a phone and begins frantically punching in 911. The son turns and rushes back to the street. The father is immediately at her side, gently holding her head in his hands. The driver comes around, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry ... I couldn't stop."

The son rushes into the street where he kneels on the other side of his mother, speaking gently to her. As he looks up he see's his father's eyes, distorted by tears. Great sadness is in his face as he sees his son across from him, "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry ... I couldn't stop," he says.

The two men, kneeling in the road, realize together that they really do have something in common, a love for this woman who completely disregarded herself, to bring them together.

Many people see God as an unreasonable parent, a maker of rules and unrealistic expectations. Many walk away from him convinced that they will never experience freedom unless they do.

Jesus, the magnificent creator of the universe. God's son, God's self, gave Himself to bring you back. Like the mother in the story, His own well being meant less to Him than our relationship with the Father.

And we come back. Amazed at Jesus' sacrifice, and grateful that He came. Fearful of the consequences of ignoring His path, slowly coming to the realization that without God there is no freedom.

So we return.

Many, probably most of you have already done this. That is wonderful.

Some of you are probably sitting there thinking the whole thing is not this simple. That it is a lot more complicated than I am presenting it. Well, in a way you are right.

Paul did put a proviso in the contract:

... if indeed you remain in the faith, established and firm, without shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.

For me, this sentence presents a dilemma. Many people I respect and love have taught that a person may never be separated from his or her salvation. Some say that this verse teaches that a person truly saved is confirmed by the fact that they do not stray.

This is not the way it looks to me, no matter how thoroughly I examine it. Paul was a Jew. The teaching was that people who neglected the covenant would be cut off from God. In that vein, translated into the Way

of Christ, Paul was teaching that there is a need for perseverance, a need to avoid "shifting from the hope of the gospel."

In some ways, it does not matter. If a person is truly in Christ, he or she will not stray is one way of expressing that if a person does stray, they are not in Christ.

So, if you are living apart from the hope either you never had it or you have abandoned it. Either way, you are living apart from Jesus, and this is not a good place to be.

On the other hand, if we take the meaning in its simplest and plainest sense, here is what Paul is saying:

You have been reconciled to God, and you will be presented before Him as blameless and holy ... if you do not abandon that reconciliation.

This has great resonance with Jesus' words:

Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

(Luke 9:62 NET)

There are dark echoes all through the scripture that warn us of the terrible consequences of stepping away from the faith. On the other hand, there are strong encouragements to persevere, if necessary even to the death, and that there are great rewards for those who do.

In the end, I don't think it makes much difference. If you don't live in the hope of the gospel, either you never had it or you have shifted away from it. Either way, you are without hope.

If you have not decided to wholly give your life to Him, you are not part of His kingdom. This is an all or

nothing proposition. If you haven't given all, you haven't given anything.

Jesus is the Creator of hope. His work on the cross can reconcile you to the Father. The sin in your life can be a rebellion that keeps you apart from Him, or you can accept His offer of redemption.

He will give it Freely. He will transform you into His own image. Holding firmly to the hope we have in Christ is part of what it means to be transformed by Him.

Please, give yourself to the Messiah. The Savior. Our God.

Contending for our fellow contenders

Colossians 1:24 – 2:5

The Bible is full of mystery. At different times, through different servants, God illuminated the mystery so that it could be better understood as the need arose. Paul sees himself as one of these servants. He says he is called to "complete the Word of God" as regards the mystery that has been revealed to him. In other words, he feels specifically called to shine a light on something that has been hidden. In shining that light, he is given the responsibility to write God's clarification to His people. His words will stand alongside Moses, Isaiah, and David as God's word.

Paul does not take this responsibility lightly. In this passage he speaks of it in three important regards, answering three questions:

- What is the mystery?
- How may we access the illumination of the mystery he is revealing?
- What is he doing to see his own responsibility fulfilled?

This is what he says:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I fill up in my physical body -- for the sake of his body, the church -- what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. I became a servant of the church according to the stewardship from God -- given to me for you -- in order to complete the word of God, that is, the mystery that has been kept hidden from ages and generations, but has now been revealed to his saints. God wanted to make known to them the glorious riches of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

We proclaim him by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ. Toward this goal I also labor, struggling according to his power that powerfully works in me.

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for those who have not met me face to face. My goal is that their hearts, having been knit together in love, may be encouraged, and that they may have all the riches that assurance brings in their understanding of the knowledge of the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this so that no one will deceive you through arguments that sound reasonable. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

(Colossians 1:24-2:5 NET)

What is the mystery?

Paul unpacks the mystery for us. This is important, because we can see from Paul's words that he sees it as the central seed to his entire ministry:

- When you become a believer, even as a Gentile, the Messiah lives in you and that life is the hope of glory.
- When He lives in you, all the wisdom and understanding of the Messiah is placed within your grasp.

All through the Scriptures it was clear that God cared about the whole world.

- Israel was to be an example to the surrounding nations
- The prophets spoke, at times directly to the nations
- God made provision for the foreigners living in Israel so that they would benefit from a close association with Him
- God promised that the Messiah would bring restoration and hope not only to His chosen, but also to the other nations

These ideas were out there for everyone to read and value. They were clear enough to serve as guides for God's will concerning attitudes and policies toward other peoples. They were not irrelevant to God. They did, in fact, have an important part in His grand plan.

However, it was not so clear how their association with God would take firm shape. He had chosen Israel and given them the covenant, so that they had His law and His temple among them. What about the nations? How would He make direct provision for them?

This is not a new concept in Scriptural thinking. All kinds of prophecy had an element of mystery. Balaam the prophet spoke of a king that would come and defeat Moab. This was during the days of Moses, over 300 years before Israel had a king. When David came along and defeated the Moabites, the details of how he would do it and the reasons why were clearer than they were in light of the prophet.

In the same way, the Messiah would come, but the details of His identity and specific power were kept hidden until they were revealed in the person of the Messiah. We understand the prophecies because in Jesus, we see how they were fulfilled.

Here Paul expands for the casual observer the role of the Messiah. Since Jesus came as Messiah, and since, as he says earlier in the letter, Jesus is God's Son and God's own Self, His power is much more profound than might have been understood from simply reading the prophets. The prophets knew the Messiah would be

- The son of David
- A light to the Gentiles
- A suffering servant
- A mighty warrior
- Even in some way, not fully explained, the presence of God

But the capacity and full significance of these roles was not understood until Jesus came and unfolded it for us. He was not an anointed one like any other prophet, priest or king. He was God's own Son, His own Self. This introduced dynamics and facets of his role as Messiah that could not have been understood before He came.

Paul is now explaining the mystery for us. By explaining Jesus' unique ability to not only inspire, but to indwell His followers, everything changes. Suddenly, Jesus' believers are not just followers of another rabbi, they are not just adherents to a cause, they are vehicles by which God enters the world. The power of the Messiah to bring hope was not limited to His own lifetime and place of ministry. It was expanded to include the work of everyone who believed in Him from that time forward.

When Peter and Paul expanded the ministry of the Messiah beyond the social borders of Judah, they were saying the Messiah was not just bringing light to the Jews like Paul, Peter and John; He was expanding

His kingdom to directly include non-Jewish people like Titus, Timothy and Clement.

This had been undefined before, and Paul was the person God chose to clarify it for all of us. So he knew his ministry was not limited to church planting and serving as a liaison between the Gentile churches and the Jewish leaders of the church back in Jerusalem. His ministry included writing it down for all time as God's Word.

What a frightening responsibility.

The responsibility is so great that Paul knows he may not simply say it and be done. So he addresses a second question to this primarily Gentile audience:

How may we access the illumination of the mystery being revealed?

Paul knew that this was a difficult thing. He knew that simply hearing about it was not enough. The ideas he was delivering had to be integrated into an intentional life practice. It would take people who were mature in their faith and he made it his goal to produce that maturity in them. That maturity would be evident to him when he saw in their church:

- hearts knit together in love
- encouragement
- the riches of assurance (through knowledge and wisdom)
- undeceived hearts

Love and encouragement are sister virtues Paul said they were already exhibiting. It was obvious. If we love someone, we will encourage them.

Young people routinely grow up to love their childhood coaches. These leaders routinely criticize and push the

envelopes of the same young people who claim later to love them like a parent. Why?

Because they did not just love them enough to encourage them. They cared enough to tell them the truth when they were messing up so they could improve. As a result, the students came away from the situation better people than they entered it. They are not the same kid with reasonable talent that they were when they went into the relationship. Now they are athletes with developed talent and skills they would not have without careful correction and guidance.

So, in their later years they appreciate the coach's work and care. They feel close to him or her, because the coach knew their weaknesses and believed in them anyway. They encouraged them when the winning results they were striving for needed skills they did not yet have, but the coach helped them to achieve.

Paul also was reiterating his desire for them to become smart about God's will. He wanted them to know the truth and to be able to distinguish it from lies. He wanted them to live in confidence of their faith in Christ.

So what was Paul doing about it?

He is investing himself.

It appears, at first glance that Paul is saying the suffering of Christ is insufficient for the body of Christ. That, somehow, His suffering was not enough, so Paul must augment it with his own suffering. This is not what Paul means. Jesus' suffering is all that is necessary for our salvation. But it is not the only suffering that will take place.

Jesus warned us that we would suffer. If the world hated Him, it will hate us too. If the head of the body suffers, the whole body suffers.

What was lacking was the fulfillment of the word of Christ, "you will suffer". Thus, Paul takes great pride in personally fulfilling this dynamic of the walk of The Way. He takes pride in it, because he caused some of that suffering and now it is his opportunity to wear the badge of identification and honor: A person who suffered like Jesus. So he uses this language:

- Suffering
- Serving
- Laboring
- Struggling

Paul suffered on many levels,

- His travel was not as easy as travel today
- His work was in good weather and bad
- He spoke of the personal, emotional burden of caring for all the churches
- He was harassed by Jews who thought he was a traitor and Gentiles who thought he was a heretic
- He was beaten, imprisoned, and stoned
- He suffered through shipwreck, and deprivation

But he saw all this as necessary steps for him to take in order to reach his goals.

Paul had important truths to teach them: the identity of Christ, their own identity in Him. They had questions he needed to answer and they had spiritual dilemmas they needed him to help them resolve.

At the same time, he needed to model for them what it takes for hearts to continue to be knit together.

It takes sacrifice and struggle.

We all have a church that we must struggle for

As you look around the congregation, you are seeing a group of people who need the same spiritual maturity, wisdom and encouragement the Colossians needed. They too must understand what it means to have Christ living in them. They too need encouragement. They too must have their hearts knit together in love.

What does that mean? You know what knitting is. It is a weave. It is a process by which many strands of thread are brought together in a network. It takes work to do this knitting, this weaving. It takes time and energy.

A knit or a weave speaks of a unity that cannot be easily accomplished and cannot be easily separated. It speaks of threads of different color being brought together for a single purpose, to create cloth.

Are you knit together? Have you invested the work that knitting or weaving takes into relationships with those who are around you?

- Paul's suffering and struggling
- The complexity and revelation of the mystery
- All the instruction

is to reach a goal, the goal of bringing among the people he serves a unity that though not easy to accomplish is also not easy to break.

The people sitting around this room, all the people from the oldest to the youngest, need heroes. They

need someone to see their need and struggle for them. And if everyone in the room needs that, then everyone in the room needs to be that.

- You are not only your brother's keeper
- You must be your sister's or brother's hero
- You must struggle for him or her

Nobody is expecting you to go through a shipwreck or endure a stoning for anyone else in this room. We are not subject to Paul's hardship, but we should be subject to some hardship.

Being a member of a church is not about coming to services on Sunday. It is about investing your energy into the kingdom of God on a local level. We like to think of the Church as a family, but it is just as much an army. Satan is attacking your fellow soldiers every day, and they are being assaulted by the world all the time. Are you struggling for them?

Paul uses a powerful word in this passage that is a vehicle for the knitting of hearts together and that brings about wisdom when it comes to our faith in the Christ who lives within us. That word is:

Encouragement

Encouragement is that thing that gives another person heart, it gives them courage. It makes their heart big enough for the job in front of them. Many things can discourage a person, or make their heart too small for the task.

- The feeling of being weak
- The feeling of being disregarded or devalued
- Being tired
- Being overwhelmed

The task at hand is not to do it for them, though that may be called for at times, but to help them feel up to that which they can do for themselves.

Most of the time, we see encouragement as a rather shallow thing. We see it as being a cheerleader along the side insisting, without real knowledge, that "you can do it!" with a big smile. There is more to actual encouragement than that.

Contending is working and struggling - investing

How well do you know each other?

There are a number of people who have been attending here for less than five years. That means some of our longer-standing members may know each other very well, but have not had the time to know the newer folks as well. If you are newer, you have an even bigger task, because there are even more people you don't know well.

It is impossible to help a person with their struggles if you don't know what those struggles are. It is rude to offer to help with their struggles if they don't know you well enough to trust you. You cannot gain their trust without sharing your own life and struggles.

Translation, in order to help another person with their struggles, it is best to share your own.

This takes time. I have often told people, and this is true, that I do not know what it is to have life long friends. Many of you go to class reunions or have periodic get-togethers with people you have known all your life. I don't know anybody that well. We moved too often when I was young.

How to be more encouraging

Look around the room. You know some people in here very well, and others you don't. Identify a few people you don't know so well. These are people Christ came to redeem and make a part of His kingdom along with you.

Determine in your heart, I will take some time to get to know this person this week. I will have a conversation with them with the purpose of becoming closer friends and knitting our hearts together.

In this conversation I will be a good listener to hear what this person wants to tell me. I will not pry, but will relax and try to hear what is important to them. I will reveal something of myself, not the deepest part of myself or embarrassing details, but enough to express what is important to me. In future conversations we will begin exploring what we have in common and what we may do to bring ourselves closer together. As we get to know each other better we will know better how to encourage each other.

Conversation is something of a lost art in our society. If we are to weave ourselves together it will have to be rediscovered. There is risk. Somebody may not like you. You may find someone difficult to get along with. Those problems do not let us off the hook. Nobody said it would be easy. Friendships are work. These difficulties merely demonstrate for us the struggle we must engage if we are to bring to fulfillment the whole mystery of the Messiah among us.

It is in this knitting, in this weave that we can know better how to encourage each other. At that point, powerful encouragement can be given in confidence and without presumption.

It will take work, but revealing the mystery to each other and to the world never has been easy.

Not rules and superstition

Colossians 2:6-23

The famous astronaut Buzz Aldrin faced a conflict after returning from the moon. He spiraled into a deep depression that ultimately resulted in him being hospitalized, medicated and put through a battery of psychiatric treatments. Ignorant of the depth of his own disability, once the medicine kicked in, he felt so much better that he immediately began making plans for a new start:

- He would divorce his wife and marry his lover
- First, he would spend Thanksgiving with his wife and children so everything could be like old times
- He would then take his wife to Acapulco for their 17th anniversary and break the news to her

Of course, his counselor was aghast and tried to talk him out of it. He was in far too fragile a state to make such life changing decisions. He was also reaching for two very different senses of fulfillment. Aldrin admits that he did not see the contradiction in this plan. His medicine made him feel better, but his mind was still not reasoning clearly. He wanted so badly to have a new start that he was grasping at everything that seemed to hold out that hope (*Return to Earth* by Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin).

That kind of contradiction is what the Colossians were facing. They were traveling a new spiritual road, rushing forward with power and speed. Along side that spirituality, in their town of great philosophical and religious industry, were a couple of other groups that wanted to lead them along their own paths. Paul, like Aldrin's counselor was working hard to help them see

the incompatibility of these two other influences with the path they had chosen. He said:

Therefore, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and firm in your faith just as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Be careful not to allow anyone to captivate you through an empty, deceitful philosophy that is according to human traditions and the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

For in him all the fullness of deity lives in bodily form, and you have been filled in him, who is the head over every ruler and authority. In him you also were circumcised -- not, however, with a circumcision performed by human hands, but by the removal of the fleshly body, that is, through the circumcision done by Christ. Having been buried with him in baptism, you also have been raised with him through your faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead.

And even though you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he nevertheless made you alive with him, having forgiven all your transgressions. He has destroyed what was against us, a certificate of indebtedness expressed in decrees opposed to us. He has taken it away by nailing it to the cross. Disarming the rulers and authorities, he has made a public disgrace of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Therefore do not let anyone judge you with respect to food or drink, or in the matter of a feast, new moon, or Sabbath days these are only the shadow of the things to come, but the reality is Christ! Let

no one who delights in humility and the worship of angels pass judgment on you. That person goes on at great lengths about what he has supposedly seen, but he is puffed up with empty notions by his fleshly mind. He has not held fast to the head from whom the whole body, supported and knit together through its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

If you have died with Christ to the elemental spirits of the world, why do you submit to them as though you lived in the world? "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" These are all destined to perish with use, founded as they are on human commands and teachings. Even though they have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship and false humility achieved by an unsparing treatment of the body -- a wisdom with no true value -- they in reality result in fleshly indulgence.

(Colossians 2:6-23 NET)

The Colossians faced two sets of teachings that endangered their understanding of true spirituality. Paul merged with the description of the problem an explanation of why the Colossians should resist being drawn in, they had received Jesus. This change in their lives brought into play many important truths:

- Everything they had learned about Jesus' Way
- The strengthening "rootedness" of their faith
- All the blessings of Jesus for which they were thankful
- Jesus' ultimate identity as God
- His resurrection
- Their forgiveness through His power
- The "circumcision" of their hearts

Paul was telling the Colossians that all of this must be measured against two problems that threatened their practice of true faith in Christ. Like Buzz Aldrin, They were facing a dilemma of contradictory values.

So Paul was reminding them of the profound nature of the road they were on:

- Remember who it is that you serve
- Remember the power He has demonstrated
- Remember what He has done for you
- Remember everything you have learned

These truths were the bases for them to evaluate the value of the alternative paths calling out to them.

What were those paths?

The early disciples were criticized by two groups: One was conservative Jewish communities who saw their teachings as a departure from tradition. The other was pagan sources who thought they threatened their own gentile cultures and religions.

First is strict Judaism

Paul is not being intolerant or anti-Semitic in these statements. He is, after all, Jewish and, his Jewish friends are important to him. He speaks of the value of the Scriptures and his policy to connect with Jews first wherever he went. The impression that we get is that he depended upon the Jews' understanding of the Scriptures to provide a solid basis for teaching in the churches he planted. The church has at times, abusing Paul's teachings, embraced anti-Semitism, but that has been wrong and an inappropriate reading of what Paul was trying to do.

To be clear, Paul saw following Jesus as an extension of true Judaism, not a departure from it. However, he

was a trained Pharisee and he wanted his disciples to avoid the trap of Pharisaical legalism.

The Apostles, all of whom were Jews, had been coming to the conclusion for a long time that the Law of Moses must be reexamined for its application to followers of the Messiah. The conclusion they came to, and that the New Testament demonstrates, is that the strict observance of the letter of the Law can distract from its real transforming power, giving a sense of technical morality. Tertullian, an influential leader of the 2nd century church in North Africa said, Paul "does not mean to criticize the mandates of the Jewish law ... His intention, rather, is only to condemn those who do not accept Christ as the One who has true authority over all such things" (ACCSNT IX:42). That's why Paul characterizes their emphasis so negatively:

- Do not handle!
- Do not taste!
- Do not touch!

Jesus indicated that we should carefully distinguish between what God wants for our spiritual health and what humans add to God's word and intentions. Human additives are expendable.

The Spirit of the Law, the intention of God should be honored more even than the words themselves. So, Paul refers to other practices found in strict Judaism:

- Circumcision
- New Moon celebrations
- Feast days
- Sabbath observance

These ideas are clearly Scriptural, but Paul is saying that, not just Gentiles, but even for Jews who wish to follow Jesus as Messiah, they need to be approached

differently; not with an idea for strict observance, but in order to honor their ultimate value. By saying they are merely a shadow, he is not devaluing them, he is putting them in perspective.

- Thus, the circumcision Paul advocates is not a mark on the flesh, but a mark on the heart
- Sabbath observance is no longer a day of the week, but a disposition of the whole person all the time, living in the holiness of God and resting in His presence

It is a misreading to say that we as Christians observe the Lord's Day as our Sabbath. We do not. Followers of Jesus are freed from strict, legal observances. We dare not substitute one for another. Belief in Jesus spells freedom for the believer. He frees us from sin and from the bondage of the Law.

So true spirituality is not in keeping rules. It is not even in keeping rules that are found in Scripture. It is a matter of making ourselves direct servants and friends of the One true God, in His Son ... His self, Jesus the Messiah. In that light, what we do in obedience is much less standardized, much more individual than a system of laws can accommodate.

Second he warns against Spiritism

Totally different from extreme legalism is the spiritual philosophy honored by people from Colossea

- They are empowered by the enemy
- They are called "elemental spirits of the world"
- They delighted in false humility
- They worshiped angels
- Involved personal visions or experience
- They had the appearance of wisdom

- They involved an unsparing treatment of the body

Ancient philosophers were never far removed from the religions we now think of as mythology. They believed battles of the gods found their way into the physical and human worlds. For example, Lucretius, who lived about 100 years before Paul spoke of the ongoing battle between the Sun or fire and water along with their associated gods. The Sun constantly struggled to gain mastery by drying up the water, but the rivers provided in such abundance that fire was constantly defeated.

The rulers of the elements: Earth, Water, Fire and Air were represented in everything from weather and politics to medicine and human personality, giving rise to the model of four personality temperaments still recognized by many today, even among Christians: Phlegmatic, Choleric, Melancholy, and Sanguine. Hypocrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Galen all considered these elemental influences, influenced by gods, demons or angels, to be at the root of everything that happened. These elemental spirits had associations with the seasons and thus with the zodiac stars and constellations that governed each particular season.

So those who worshiped these spirits or prayed to them as angels or gods in hopes of affecting the human world were removing their faith from the One True God. Just as today, some believers in God cannot quite put these ideas behind them. Some practices were apparently hard to shake.

For example, in ancient times, a person might fast and avoid sleep in order to induce visions for the sake of visions, not for the sake of knowing God. Some of this fasting can and does induce hallucinations. So Paul

warns against the false humility of these kinds of fasts, and the spiritual pride that resulted from the "visions" they experienced. Paul is identifying the philosophical and pagan ideas represented in Colossea as having their source in evil "Rulers and Authorities".

"Rulers and Authorities" are references to angels and demons. To the ancients, false gods were not just works of imagination, they represented a supernatural hierarchy in which different spheres of authority were under the command of specific angels or demons, including Satan - whom some believed to be the angel over the nation of Edom. So, to dabble in philosophies of the elemental spirits was to give demons, even Satan himself access to your life.

Paul was saying that whichever extreme falsehood you gave in to, you were being led astray:

- Whether they chose to follow God, but only in the framework of legalistic, strict observance of rules
- Or whether they mixed their faith with the spiritism and philosophies of the surrounding culture

Either one was going to lead to problems. But as disciples of Jesus, we are not subject to either. When Jesus sacrificed Himself on the cross, it was to fulfill the strict demands of the Law and to overthrow Satan and his systems of dominance.

Today's disciples still struggle

Here are a few examples:

The more conservative branches of many churches repeatedly and chronically fall prey to legalism. As we see the problems caused for and by people because of the abuse of freedom, many fall back on strict rules.

Although much good theology is developed in these circles, their insistence on "standards" is binding and contrary to freedom in Christ.

Some believers have a vague misunderstanding of angels. Their ideas of what angels do and why are formed by a mix of biblical stories, folk legend and vaguely Christian traditions mixed with pagan ideas. Because of current popular literature and religious ideas, some think we should pray to angels and dispatch them for our personal desire. This is a naive and sloppy approach to angels. They are not there for us to command. They are servants of God alone.

As I pointed out, some Christians, even one high profile author recognized throughout the evangelical church, advocate an elemental categorization of personalities. I'm not saying that all his analysis is wrong. I am simply saying that his basis is faulty.

There are systems of diet and nutrition that are claimed as "the godly way to eat." I believe we should exercise wisdom in our food, but when it comes to setting up some things as "biblical food" and others as "sinful" we are simply replacing one legalistic, dietary bondage with another, saying, as Paul warns against: "touch not, taste not." Some of the systems out there are poorly disguised marketing schemes designed to make money for their authors and advocates.

Many believers, some I personally know, consult their horoscopes. Some do so because they are amazed at what they think is the accuracy of the readings. Others see it as entertainment. In either case, they are opening their decision making faculties up to an influence that is not consistent with the victory Christ exercised over the elemental spirits on the cross.

What can we do?

Ask yourself what you trust

It sounds bad to say it, but the Bible is not a complete guide to everything. Where it speaks, it is perfect, but where it is vague or silent, we should be careful. Psychology and medical science teaches us things necessary to our bodily and mental health. We should learn from them. But I get nervous when I hear anyone, even trusted Christian leaders speak of the 21 indisputable laws of anything. Only one "thing" is indisputable, and He is not a thing.

Remember that all things should be under God's direct control, even our understanding of His word. No matter what systems we follow, we must hold them with a loose grip. Only one truth deserves the place of inviolability, and that is the One who is the Truth.

Recognize and avoid the elements of actual paganism that surround us

By this I am referring to Horoscopes, tarot readings, channeling or other means of speaking to the dead. Even some drug usage is touted as a way to get in touch with the spiritual world. In biblical days, this was called sorcery.

I am not talking about fictional stories or TV shows that are influenced by things even the author does not believe. I am also not talking about meditation technique or exercises that really amount to nothing more than sound emotional and bodily exercise.

What I am referring to are the dark practices in our world that open us to dark influence and have negative spiritual repercussions. As believers we are called to avoid these practices.

Guard against legalism

You are free in Christ. Paul warned against using this freedom as a license for sin, so don't go crazy. But it does mean that the man-made rules people like to place on believers don't always apply. People like to make being a "real" Christian all about superficialities:

- Don't listen to certain types of music
- Don't go to movies or watch TV
- Don't eat certain things
- Don't smoke, drink or chew ... and don't go out with girls that do
- Wear your hair a certain way
- Don't work on Sunday
- Have a certain kind of car or home
- Dress a certain way

We as Mennonites have a history of this kind of rule mongering, demanding things of people that not only are not in the Law of Moses, they are not even tangentially alluded to in the Bible. At the risk of seeming critical of my own spiritual mentors and elders, I will side with Paul. Don't let anyone stand in judgement over you based on these kind of criteria.

Live honestly, with a mind to pleasing your Maker and Master, obeying the demands He places on your life; avoiding things that will hamper your spiritual health. This may mean there are things your believing friends do, that you have to avoid. That is the "personal" part of your "personal relationship with God." I like the way one mentor of mine put it. He said, "when you need to know God's will regarding a certain activity, ask yourself three questions:

- Is it a morally right thing to do?
- Am I able, physically and financially to do it?
- Do I want to do it?

If the answer to all three questions is yes, go for it." It sounds simple, but that is what freedom in Christ means. If we can honestly avoid rationalizations for sin and trust the Holy Spirit living inside us, we are on the road to knowing true freedom.

True Godly Character

Colossians 3:1–14

(This message is begun wearing dirty, torn or worn clothes ... shirt, scarf, shoes, socks, jewelry ... and in the middle changed into a nicer suit. This should be done in a quite non-provocative way, no pants or revealed skin in the change-over. Amusing; not alarming.)

This passage is directly connected to the previous passage. Paul relieves our anxiety about rules and warns us against pagan influence, but he does not leave us hanging. The Colossians were seeking for true wisdom, and Paul cannot say what it is not, without clarifying what it is.

So, if the true path to spiritual wisdom is not in strictly following rules or seeking out the spiritual wisdom of the world, where is it? Paul says it is not in the details, but in the development of a character that is rightly oriented. The specific actions of a person reveal our innermost concerns. So, we look at our actions, not to see if we are in compliance, but to see if our inner person is being transformed. This approach is less measurable, but in the end, more reliable.

Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Keep thinking about things above, not things on the earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ (who is your life) appears, then you too will be revealed in glory with him.

So put to death whatever in your nature belongs to the earth: sexual immorality, impurity, shameful

passion, evil desire, and greed which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience. You also lived your lives in this way at one time, when you used to live among them. But now, put off all such things as anger, rage, malice, slander, abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another since you have put off the old man with its practices and have been clothed with the new man that is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the one who created it. Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all.

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if someone happens to have a complaint against anyone else. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also forgive others. And to all these virtues add love, which is the perfect bond.

(Colossians 3:1-14 NET)

Paul uses two images to clarify his ideas: Life / death, and dressing / undressing.

Life is found in Jesus, not in our earthly nature

How do we seek the things above? Paul says it is in thinking about them. The beauty of it is, that when he begins clarifying, the only "thing" above that Paul can recommend is Christ himself. He is risen and living, sitting at God's right hand. Jesus is the source and the keeper of your life, which will find its fullness not here and now, but later, in eternity.

Jesus is our life. So, think about Jesus. There is more to it than that, but it is an incredible start.

On the other hand, we should put to death the things inside us that draw us back to this earth. Paul generalizes in his examples of things of this earth which we should put to death:

- sexual immorality
- impurity
- shameful passion
- evil desire
- and greed which is idolatry

Paul often begins lists of evil things with sexual sin. It is clear that he thought this was a prominent problem for many people. If you have problems with it, don't be shocked, so do many others. Other than this one item, he is more general.

- Do you have mixed motives? That is impurity.
- Are you passionate about things that are better not spoken of? That is a shameful passion.
- Do you secretly or openly desire evil things?

Look carefully at greed. When we desire things to the point of unsatisfiable grasping at more and more, we are making those things we want god and placing them in the highest position of our lives. We may as well melt it all down, mold it into an idol, and worship it every day. We are reembracing our own death instead of killing the deeds of darkness.

Don't forget, when you let your heart return to these motivations, you are realigning yourself with the very things that are going to be judged in God's wrath. When you aligned yourself with Christ, you killed these things inside you. However, like a rusty sculpture, you can clear the rust away, but when it rains you will have

to touch it up. These are things we have to kill within us, not once, but every day.

What are you wearing?

Now Paul shifts his image from life and death and looks instead at an image that suggests clothing. He says that when we readmit these dark impulses, it is like wearing old, dirty, worn out clothes. He wants them to divest themselves of:

- anger
- rage
- malice
- slander
- abusive language
- lies

There is an appropriate sequence to things. You can't wear a suit over your work shirt. You can't wear a gown over your coveralls. Before virtue can be put on, vice must be taken off.



When he speaks of taking off vices he addresses things that are more obvious, mostly associated with speaking or violence. Anger, rage, and malice speak of the hatred that we are capable of harboring and exhibiting. Slander, abusive language, and lies are the tools we use to dismantle the

reputations, the personal peace, and the integrity of others. Paul is addressing a very obvious bitterness. These are vices that somebody at Colossea was wearing on their sleeve.

But the Colossians and all disciples are being inducted into a new life and identity. This new identity is the original form in which man was made, a redemption of

the lost humanity of Adam. It is a renewal of the image of God, the best dignity, beauty, and integrity in humanity. Those characteristics we should "wear" and show to the world are those features that are like Christ.

Nobody has an advantage here. Paul emphasizes the two main groups he is addressing: Jews and Greeks (meaning Greek speaking Roman citizens). Certainly the Jews among them may have felt a sense of superiority. The Gentiles may have felt that others were outsider immigrants, but Paul's says neither has a right to feel this way.



After that, he lists the most outlandish gathering he can describe with the most obvious, socially problematic combinations. No extremity of differences can divest true believers of their primary identity and commonality in Christ. That always comes first.



Barbarians were the tribal peoples beyond the reach of the empire, people in places like northern Britain and Germany ... horrors! Sythians were the filthy, violent, ultra-barbaric tribes to the far North who drank human blood using human skulls for their cup. But on a more practical level, for the

Colossians, even if one man could be claimed as property and another could do the claiming, the only thing that matters is Christ, the one on the throne beside God the Father and the One who is present in all believers, regardless of their backgrounds.

Now that Paul's hearers have divested themselves of the clothing of death, he encourages them to get dressed up in the beautiful clothes of life.

- mercy
- kindness
- humility
- gentleness
- patience
- love

This list is very similar to Paul's list of the Fruit of the Spirit. These virtues flow from Christ who lives in the inner person. They should increasingly become visible trademarks.

Two virtues gain special notice. One is patience. Paul directly associated patience with forgiveness. When we have a complaint against someone, we cannot claim to be truly patient with them if we cannot forgive them the way Jesus forgave us. So, when you see your brothers and sisters against whom you have something, are you truly patient with them or are you harboring a hidden bitterness? Are you wearing your old rags beneath your formal?



Love also gains special attention. It is the virtue that binds all the rest together. Without love; patience, kindness, gentleness and mercy are all a show, a put-on, a cheap costume. This is how John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Antioch in the third century put it:

All those things fall apart, unless they are done with love. This is the love that binds them all together. Whatever good thing it is you mention, if love be absent, it is nothing, it melts away. ... in a body,

though the bones be large, if there be no ligaments, they are of no service.

The letter to the Colossians is about wisdom and it is about love. The two are woven together seamlessly. If we are not loving we are not wise. If we are not wise, we could be more loving.

Notice how the virtues we put on directly contrast the destructive vices we are meant to take off:

- Instead of raging at someone, be kind to them
- Instead of being angry when you are wronged, be merciful
- Instead of harboring hatred, humbly place yourself beneath that person
- Instead of slandering someone, treat them with gentleness
- Instead of inflicting abusive language, be patient and forgiving
- Don't lie to or about people, love them



The contrast is so stark as to be shocking. It inspires disbelief that the same person could appear so incredibly different.

How do we do it?

The answer is simple, according to Paul.

What are we thinking about?

Keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Keep thinking about things above, not things on the earth ...

How can we tell if we are accomplishing the goal?

There is a scientific method used to see if children are generally cooperative or disruptive in a classroom, and to make sure the teacher is not biased against him in some way. The teacher is meant to set a discrete timer, and every time the timer gets her attention, she is meant to look at the child and ask: Is the child being good or bad? If they randomly check 12 times in a day, and 9 out of 12 times they are being good, they are probably an ok kid.

Do it for your own benefit. Pick a day this week. On that day, every time you hear a machine start up (an air conditioner, a car, a refrigerator, a TV or radio, an alarm, a phone or beeper ... you get the picture ... when a machine makes a noise that gets your attention, ask yourself the question:

What was I thinking about?

Ideally, make a note of it. Scribble down the details on a card in your pocket. If you can't do that, make a quick check list:

At the end of the day honestly review yourself. What were you most thinking about at random times during the day? When you add it all up, are you thinking about things of this earth or things above more often?

You may think this isn't fair. When you are at work, you are meant to concentrate on

Thinking on things	
Of Earth	Above
X	
	X
	X

your job. In fact, if you didn't you would not be exercising the kind of integrity that is right and good and expected by God.

An average person reads or speaks a few hundred words a minute, but thinks thousands of words a minute. Even when we are concentrating, our minds are multi-tasking. They can't help it.

It's like weighing your load. You account for the weight of the truck. If you are generally focused upon a task, take that into account. For purposes of this study, disregard it. Without a doubt, your mind was dwelling on more than one thing. What were the other things? Were the things of God anywhere in the equation? If they were, give yourself credit.

You will find one of two things by the end of the day:

- You are thinking of the things of God
- Or you are not so much

If not, your path is clear. If you are, take your analysis to the next level. Are the things of God that occupy your mind wrapped in

Thinking on things		
Of Earth	Above	With love
X		
	X	X

love for others: kindness, gentleness, patience, humility? If they are not, they should be.

If you get done with the study and find that you seem to be doing ok, before you start patting yourself on the back, do another study with that question in mind:

I will not be collecting this assignment. It will not affect your "church grade." Grade it yourself and find ways to do better. Paul suggests some at the end of this passage: pursuing peace, thankfulness, godly music.

You may want to show your results to someone ... a spiritual mentor or prayer partner. That would be good. Talk about it. Find out what you could do better.

- We all have ways we could grow
- We all have cleaner, newer clothes we could wear
- God has given us His own infinite self to think about
- The more we think about Him and the things He values

The more we are living wise, loving spiritual lives

A Godly household

Love and Wisdom; God and you

Colossians 3:18–4:1

Paul was sending a slave back to his master, and he was concerned that Philemon's gracious treatment and this slave's escape and rebellion not be seen by other slaves as an opportunity to copy Onesimus' earlier, rebellious example. These other ideas are not big problems for the Colossians, but Paul briefly mentions and explains them.

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

Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them.

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing in the Lord.

Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they will not become disheartened.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in every respect, not only when they are watching -- like those who are strictly people-pleasers -- but with a sincere heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you are doing, work at it with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not for people, because you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as the reward. Serve the Lord Christ. For the one who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there are no exceptions.

Masters, treat your slaves with justice and fairness, because you know that you also have a master in heaven.
(Colossians 3:18-4:1 NET)

What does a believer at home look like? First ask what is my primary identity or identities at home:

- Wife
- Husband
- Child
- Parent

Then there is a basic guideline that applies to you because of that identity.

- Wives are in submission to their husbands
- Husbands love their wives
- Children obey their parents
- Parents do not provoke their children
- Slaves obey their masters
- Masters treat their slaves justly and fairly

Each of these guidelines are defined more specifically or given a rationale.

- Wives submit ... because it is appropriate
- Husbands love ... in spite of the temptation to fight
- Children obey ... because it pleases God
- Parents do not provoke ... in order to encourage your children

Introduce the elephant

There is a big thing here about slaves and masters and it raises several questions:

- Is Paul condoning slavery?
- Does it have anything to do with a society where slavery is not tolerated?
- Is there anything at all we can get out of it?

Paul is not condoning or condemning slavery. He is acknowledging it as a reality. For the most part, since it is not a reality in our world, some like to draw

connections between Paul's instructions and employment. That is ok, as far as it goes. But at any given time, we may quit our jobs and go somewhere else. It has strong implications for people who have little flexibility or who have unusual power. Perhaps few jobs are out there. This gives bosses more power.

Here Paul has little to say to slave keepers. He says all that somewhere else. Mostly, he speaks to slaves like Onesimus, the slave who is delivering this letter.

So to slaves and keepers, Paul says:

Be fair and be just. Always be aware of the treatment God, your master, gives you. Don't be harsh, but treat slaves with respect. Some ancient writers took his instruction to mean that masters should provide well for their slaves, even paying them for their work. But none of us keep slaves. Suffice it to say that if you hold an unusual amount of power over anyone, it is wrong for you to exploit that power and it is right for you to treat him with respect and fairness.

The biggest point Paul makes in the passage is in the way a slave should behave. Again, none of us ever will be slaves, but every single person finds himself in the legitimate power of someone. This is not bad, it is real. So, how should we respond? With obedience.

What kind of obedience? The kind that has integrity. It does not matter whether or not the cat is away, the mice do not play. We work at the orders of others because it is right for us to do so. The quality of our work should never be dependent upon supervision.

Obey with sincerity and energy. It does not matter whether we like the work or not. We may not do it half-heartedly. We should do the whole job, we should do it well, and we should do it in good time.

Do it as if Jesus Himself was boss. Don't do it for the paycheck but for the reward He gives in eternity. God establishes the authorities in our lives. Even if we get away with shoddy, slow or grumbling work with our bosses, God notices.

Can you, and do you treat,

- every floor swept
- every gear shifted
- every shelf stocked
- every penny counted
- every customer served

As a stroke of work done for the kingdom of God?

Household operation, not employment is Paul's main concern. But whether in a home or a workplace, they are as much a witness as any religious word you speak. It is difficult to witness at home, and we must come to grips with the way a believer behaves at home.

Wives, submit to your husbands.

This is not a popular word and more than one person has interpreted it as meaning that Paul hated women. and yet, Peter said the same thing.

It grinds against many women to hear this. Ladies, your impulse is part of the curse. One translation of the Bible puts the Genesis curse on the woman like this:

You will want to control your husband,
but he will dominate you." *(Genesis 3)*

In this passage we begin seeing that the harmony between the man and the woman was damaged in the fall. The power struggle between them arises from the curse. The raw dominance of men in their homes is not

part of God's original design. As part of the struggle, women, it says, will desire control over their men.

But Paul says submission is more in keeping with God's plan. It is appropriate. It is fitting. But I don't believe that it is indiscriminate and unconditional. I don't believe it means that her submission in sinful things is fitting.

I knew a woman who was determined to submit to her husband in everything, and he wanted to swap her out for the wife of another couple. She believed that she was meant to submit to this. This was clearly not a situation where her submission would have been, to quote Paul, "fitting in the Lord."

We need not go to extremes to clarify Paul's words. Our tendency to see things in terms of night and day can blind us to the beauties of the sunset. We forget that between black and white is not merely gray, but every color of the rainbow. When Paul says for the woman to submit, he is not commanding the ultimate and unquestioning submission due to a master or even submission that comes naturally because of strength or personality. He is encouraging a submission that is given for the glory of God.

Husbands, love your wives

The impulse to dominate can overwhelm a man. It can blind him to his own lack of gentleness. It can make him selfish and overbearing. Even around other men, a man's impulse to resolve all challenges with force is never far from the surface. Fighting does solve disputes, by turning overcoming problems into overcoming people. It is simpler. And any man who resorts to force to solve his issues is simple-minded. It proves only that he can indulge his own selfishness.

As much as a woman's desire to control her husband is part of the fall, a husband's urge to dominate her is. Husbands are meant to lead, not dominate. When a woman is being subjected to domineering physical, emotional or sexual abuse, her submission is not appropriate. Her protection of her health and safety and that of her children is more appropriate and fitting in the Lord.

Instead, men, love your wife. Do not allow the taming of your strength to make you bitter. Do not allow disagreements with her to sour your spirit. Do not be harsh. Do not be mean. Do not be abusive. Do not fight. These are not the features of love.

Both the love of the husband and the submission of the wife draw the other into their own example. Once again John Chrysostom says it better than I could:

To love ... is the husband's part, to yield pertains to the other side. If, then, each one contributes his own part, all stand firm. From being loved, the wife too becomes loving; and from her being submissive, the husband learns to yield.

Men, love is not a power struggle or a declaration that you are the tie breaker in every disagreement:

Love is patient

Love is kind

Love is not self centered

Love trusts

Love believes

Love hopes

Love never fails

(1 Corinthians 13)

I am afraid, men, that we have allowed this description to fit women better than it fits us. And we are the ones given the command to love.

Children obey your parents

Children are not inclined to do this. But if a child truly wants to claim to be a believer, it is how he or she will behave. It is not always fun or in keeping with our image of ourselves, but as children, we are called to obey. It is pleasing to God.

If a child wants to please God, this is his or her first instruction. Our parents are our first, best teachers and pastors. If you do as they say, you are exercising your first and most immediate obedience. It is good.

But, Parents, Do not provoke your children

There is a fine line of wisdom in parenting. You can and should expect obedience from your children, but you should also be wise in what you require and how you treat and speak to them. Our tone and the character of our expectations upon children should avoid demanding, but should encourage them in their obedience.

Allow me to confess my ignorance. I am not good with children, largely because I do not have any. It is easy for me to become the unwitting victim of their manipulations. I will not pretend to be a child rearing expert and will not presume to give you too much advice. My purpose here is to attempt to interpret what Paul is saying about appropriate and fruitful parenting. It is not much, only one line, so I will attempt also not to over-do it.

Pay attention to the responses of your children. If they are prone to anger in response to your treatment of them, perhaps it is time to try a new approach. It is a path for them to walk and you are their guide. Their path is obedience. Your guidance determines how they walk:

- In anger and resentment
- Or in courage, curiosity and enthusiasm

In other words, the fact that your children obey you is not as good a gauge of your parenting as the spirit in which they obey. We sometimes think that if we get compliance that is enough.

I like the story that Stephen Covey tells in the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. His daughter has a birthday party. After she opens her presents the children want to play, but she does not want to share her gifts with them. So Dr. Covey tries everything:

- He tries appealing to her better nature: It is nice to share
- He tries appealing to her gratitude: They just gave you the gifts, they were nice to you
- He tries bribery (in a whisper): If you share, I will give you some gum (to which she loudly responds in the hearing of the other parents that she doesn't want any gum)
- He threatens: If you don't share, I will punish you
- Finally he uses force: Over her protests, he takes some of the gifts away from his daughter and distributes them to the other children

You may think he did the right thing, but Dr. Covey believes that in her frustration, that particular lesson of the value of sharing was stolen from his daughter. He could have been more understanding of her desire to explore her new toys before, with a sense of security and generosity, sharing them with others.

I will not question his wisdom. I will only say that our goals sometimes need to be adjusted. We need to have loftier and more positive goals in many things, including child rearing.

- ▶ We should not just coerce and require obedience
- ▶ We should inspire willing and cheerful obedience
- ▶ A child's obedience should not be a burden to her
- ▶ It should be an opportunity for joy and fulfillment

Certainly children are fallen too, and it is not an easy thing to accomplish, but the difficulty of a goal should never cause us to dismiss it. It may mean that as much as training our children, we need to train ourselves.

The most appropriate approach to this passage is a personal approach

Which are you? Check all that apply:

- Wife
- Husband
- Parent
- Child

Take upon yourself the attitude that fuels the appropriate behavior.

- Is your disposition toward your husband appropriate in light of your relationship to Christ?
- Is your love for your wife given without bitterness?
- Is your obedience to your parents given with the goal of pleasing God?
- Is your treatment of your children extended with the goal of encouraging them?

We may not withhold our own appropriate attitude awaiting a shift in the other. In counseling of every kind, the truth is repeated that the only person you can

control is yourself. Their attitudes and actions are not your responsibility. Your own are. If Chrysostom was right, then our own example encourages the movement of the other toward their own better place.

The home is the first and deepest front of witness for the kingdom. How we live there, most accurately and profoundly represents the transformation of Jesus on our lives. If He can change you on that level, he can change your spouse, your child, or your parents. He can prove to others the claims you make, whether it is to bring your household to Him or to make your home an outpost of His kingdom.

Jesus' command comes out to us as it came out to Peter. When it comes to the obedience of others, he challenges him:

What is that to you? ... You follow me!

The team

Lessons in Character and Loyalty

The messengers

Tychicus: He is called a faithful brother who is also an encouragement. He carries this letter and is also credited with carrying the letter to Ephesus. He was later sent as temporary replacements for Titus at Crete and Timothy at Ephesus.

Onesimus: A slave who came to Christ under Paul's ministry when he escaped to Rome. His return is the central subject of the letter to Philemon. In the second century, he is called the Bishop of Ephesus by Ignatius, a bishop and one of John's disciples.

Paul's continuing coworkers

The Jews

Aristarchus: Apparently with Paul since his second mission. His life was threatened by a crowd in Ephesus when the pagan merchants incited a riot. He joined Paul on his third mission and as he went to Jerusalem. It is likely that he has been with Paul through his entire imprisonment, shipwreck and house arrest in Rome.

Mark: The cousin of Barnabas. Mark traveled with Paul and Barnabas part of the way on their first mission. Paul refused to bring Mark along on his second mission and they parted ways when he and Barnabas quarreled about the decision. Paul later asked Timothy to bring Mark along when he was expecting execution. This entry indicates peace and reconciliation among

Mark, Barnabas, and Paul. Mark is later found with Peter and, together they write the gospel of Mark.

Jesus aka Justus: Nothing else is known of this man, but it is important to note that Paul found his Jewish friends to be a special comfort to him.

The Gentiles

Epaphras: Called Epaphroditus in the letter to Philippi. He is probably from Colosseae or Ephesus, and is credited with evangelizing most of the church of Colossae. He seems to have been an active and tireless intercessor for Colosseae. An illness while he was with Paul almost killed him, but he was distressed by the concern of others. He was later sent along with Timothy to deliver the Letter to the Philippians.

Luke: The author of the books of Luke and Acts. Luke joined Paul on his second mission just before they went to Macedonia and seems never to have left his side. He was the only companion that never left Paul when he was later facing execution.

Demas: This man seems to have been known to the Colossians. However, though Paul says where others have gone when he writes to Timothy from his execution prison, Demas, he clarifies, deserted him and completely turned his back on the faith.

Timothy: Timothy, of course, joined Paul on his second mission and quickly became a trusted protegee. He is faithful enough to be trusted with ministry on his own, as a short term leader in Thessalonica shortly after the church was planted, and later appointing leaders in Ephesus. According to the book of Hebrews, Timothy was imprisoned, but had been released.