

# Paul's Prison Epistles

Lesson 2

Paul and the Colossians

Manuscript



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Two

### Paul and the Colossians

#### INTRODUCTION

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There is a famous story by the American author Mark Twain called "The Prince and the Pauper." In this story, a prince invites a poor beggar into his castle and, for fun, the two exchange clothes. As the story goes, the beggar, being mistaken for the prince, is kept in the castle and lives the life of a prince. But the prince is mistaken for the beggar and is thrown out of the castle. Now, had the prince known that he would be thrown out of the castle, I'm sure he never would have agreed to change clothes with the beggar. Dabbling in such simple fun could never be worth losing so much.

In some ways, the situation in the city of Colossae during the first century resembled the story of "The Prince and the Pauper." The Christians in Colossae were being tempted to exchange their great privileges in Christ for the practice of pagan forms of worship. So, Paul wrote an epistle to remind the Colossians of the tremendous riches and royal privileges they enjoyed in Christ, the King over all. And he warned them of the serious consequences of trading these blessings for the meager benefits that idolatry pretended to offer.

This is the second lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*. We've entitled this lesson "Paul and the Colossians." In this lesson, we'll be studying Paul's canonical letter to the believers in Colossae. As we'll see, while Paul was in prison, he wrote to the Colossians in response to heretical teachings that introduced the veneration of lesser spiritual beings into Christian worship. Our study of Paul and the Colossians will divide into three parts. First, we'll explore the background of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Second, we'll investigate the structure and content of this letter. And third, we'll focus on its modern application. Let's turn first to the background of Paul's letter to the Colossians.

#### BACKGROUND

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Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, and writing letters from prison was an aspect of his authoritative ministry as Christ's representative. But Paul's letters were not just collections of authoritative teaching. Rather, they were also very personal and pastoral, motivated by love and concern for the churches and people to whom he wrote. In this sense, Paul's letters were also "occasional." That is, they were written to address specific issues in particular times and places. For this reason, as we study Paul's letter to the Colossians, it's important for us to know something about the occasion that prompted Paul's writing. We have to ask questions like: "What problems did the Colossians face?" and "What motivated Paul to write to them?"

We'll approach the background to Paul's letter to the Colossians from two directions. First, we'll mention his relationships with the Colossian church in general and

with individuals within the church. And second, we'll investigate some of the problems in Colossae that concerned Paul. Let's begin by looking at Paul's relationships with the Colossians.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Paul didn't have the same relationship with every Colossian Christian, so we'll focus first on his relationship with the church in general, and then on his relationships with several specific individuals. Let's turn first to his relationship with the church in Colossae.

### Church

The city of Colossae was located in the Roman province of Asia in a region called Phrygia. It lay in the Lycus Valley, a bit to the east of the larger and more popular city of Laodicea. Colossae was relatively small, and by the political and economic standards of the day, it was certainly the least important city to receive any of Paul's canonical letters. Paul had never actually visited the church in Colossae, but he cared deeply for them nonetheless. Listen to his words in Colossians 2:1:

I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face (Colossians 2:1).

Now, Paul had traveled through Phrygia during his second and third missionary journeys, but for some reason he had not visited the Colossian church. Possibly, he had been to Colossae prior to the establishment of the church there. Or perhaps he had visited the city but had not had the opportunity to meet with the followers of Christ there. It's also possible that he'd never even visited the city of Colossae. Whatever the case, Paul did not know most of these believers personally.

Nevertheless, we're able to learn some things about Paul's relationship with the Colossians from the details in his letter to them, as well as from his letter to Philemon, who lived in Colossae. First, we read that Paul had indirect contact with the Colossians through representatives, such as his Colossian friends Epaphras, Philemon and Onesimus, and his messenger Tychicus. Second, although they had not met face to face, Paul and the Colossians corresponded with each other. For instance, Epaphras brought reports of the Colossians to Paul. And Paul sent at least one letter to the church in Colossae, namely the New Testament epistle to the Colossians. Third, Paul and the Colossians ministered to each other. For instance, Paul not only struggled in prison on their behalf, he also prayed specifically for them. As he wrote in Colossians 1:9:

From the day we heard [about you], we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:9).

Paul regularly prayed for the Colossians, asking for the blessings he knew would most benefit them.

The Colossians ministered to Paul as well. We learn from Paul's letters to the Colossians, and to Philemon, that the Colossian men Epaphras and Onesimus visited Paul in prison. And since the Colossian church sent messengers to Paul, it's reasonable to assume that they prayed for him too. In short, even though Paul had not personally met most of the Colossian believers, they shared affection and affinity for one another, making their relationship real and substantial.

**As you begin to read Colossians, it becomes clear right away how much affection he has for them. Now, obviously he's heard some things, some problematic things, because of the problems that he addresses later in the letter. But ... he gives thanks for their perseverance and their earnestness and their growth in the faith, and then he expresses his prayers for them, that they would continue to persevere and endure. And then, that greeting ends with his confidence that they and he both share in the power of the gospel that God has brought them out of the dominion of darkness into the dominion of God's light. And he says "us" there twice. So, even before he starts to address the problems, he praises them and he prays for them. So, it's clear that Paul speaks to them out of a great affection for them. And this is probably a really good model for how we address problems in the church today that we make sure we do it in the context of our shared love and commitment toward one another.**

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Having seen the nature of Paul's relationship with the church in Colossae, we should look at his relationships with specific individuals with whom he was more familiar.

## Individuals

Paul had a number of friends from Colossae. These were not just people with whom he was acquainted, but personal friends, many of whom had labored alongside Paul in gospel ministry. Three such friends were Philemon, Apphia and Archippus. Listen to Paul's words in Philemon 1-2, which form the salutation to that letter:

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house (Philemon 1-2).

Philemon, at least, was Paul's close friend. And Paul's mention of the woman, Apphia would seem to indicate that he knew her as well. Many scholars believe that she was a member of Philemon's household — probably his wife. Since Archippus was a person of status within the church, Paul's address to him might be honorary. But it is more likely that he was also part of Philemon's family, perhaps his son.

Another of Paul's friends from Colossae was Epaphras. Paul referred to Epaphras as his fellow worker and fellow prisoner, and mentioned that Epaphras was a faithful minister of Christ. Epaphras remained with Paul in prison when Paul sent his letter to the Colossian church. Paul's friend Onesimus was also from Colossae. Onesimus was a slave who appears to have sought out Paul after fleeing from Philemon, and who ended up ministering to Paul in prison.

Most of Paul's friends seem to have been associated in some way with Philemon. But whatever their relationships to one another were, it's clear that Paul had closer relationships with these friends than he had with the Colossian church in general. Still, as his letter to the Colossians shows, his relationships with these friends increased his love for all the believers in Colossae. So then, generally speaking, Paul had a fairly minimal personal relationship with the Colossian church, but he also cared deeply and personally for several of its members. And he had strong feelings for their church because of his deep friendships there.

Having examined the background of Paul's relationships with the Colossians, both in general and with particular individuals, we're ready to look into the problems in Colossae that concerned Paul. What difficulties did the Colossians face? What prompted Paul to write to them from prison?

## PROBLEMS IN COLOSSAE

While Paul was in prison, he was visited by his friend Epaphras from the city of Colossae. Epaphras told Paul about some false teaching that was threatening the churches of the Lycus Valley, including the church in Colossae. So, to defend the church against this false teaching, Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians.

We don't know all the details of the problems with false teaching in Colossae, but Paul's letter tells us several things. First, the false teaching in Colossae seems to have mixed Christianity with elements of Greek philosophy. Second, it depended heavily on Jewish law. And third, it insisted that there were many spiritual beings that Christians were required to venerate and appease. Let's look first at the aspects of this teaching that related to Greek philosophy.

### Greek Philosophy

In the first century Mediterranean world, there was no sharp distinction between religious and intellectual thought. And, as a result, the word "philosophy" was typically applied to occult religions, especially those that were based on religious traditions. Often,

these traditions involved special mysteries and rites, as well as secret knowledge and wisdom. Sadly, some of these occult philosophies were finding their way into the church at Colossae.

We can see Paul's concern over these occult philosophies in Colossians 2:1-4:

I am contending for you ... in order that [you] may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge... so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments (Colossians 2:1-4, NIV).

Paul's words here indicate that the Colossians valued mystery, wisdom and knowledge, all of which Greek philosophy and religion typically valued. So, in response to the claims of false teachers who were promoting these values in the church at Colossae, Paul emphasized that true mystery, wisdom and knowledge were found only in Christ, and not in pagan religion. Then in Colossians 2:8, Paul explicitly identified pagan philosophy as his target and condemned it in no uncertain terms:

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ (Colossians 2:8).

Here, Paul directly labeled the false teaching "philosophy and empty deceit." As we've seen, in typical Greek usage, the word philosophy referred to religious speculations based on traditions, not to purely intellectual or rational study. These verses strongly suggest that the false teachers in Colossae were enamored with beliefs and practices rooted in Greek religion and occult mysticism. To gain acceptance in the church, they probably embraced some elements of Christianity. But they clearly did not embrace Christianity as it was taught by the apostles, or else they would not have relied on occult tradition as the basis of their system.

**In Colossians 2:8 it looks like Paul is opposed to philosophy in general, but that's not what his statement is about. He doesn't say "Beware of philosophy," per se, but "Beware of the philosophy," a philosophia; that is, he's talking about a particular philosophy that he wants the Colossians to avoid. And that philosophy is what scholars tend to call the Colossian heresy, a heresy that shows up in the book of Colossians that Paul defends against. In that heresy, the Colossians had demoted Christ as the means of fellowship with God, or as the means of having a right relationship with God, and had promoted instead spiritual powers, ritualistic practices ... and perhaps mystical experiences as well. And so, when Paul says, "Beware of the philosophy," we can maybe say he's arguing "Beware of things that demote Jesus." Jesus is the head of all rule and authority. If you want**



**God, you have to get Jesus. So, beware of other things that detract from that.**

— Dr. Alan Hultberg

The pagan philosophy advocated by the false teachers in Colossae also seems to have included elements of asceticism. Asceticism is:

**an improper avoidance of physical pleasure**

This concept is often rooted in the mistaken idea that pleasure is immoral, and it sometimes goes so far as to advocate inflicting physical pain on oneself. Paul denounced such asceticism in Colossians 2:20-23:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why ... do you submit to regulations — “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ...? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting ... asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:20-23).

As this passage indicates, Paul objected to the ascetic practices in Colossae for at least two reasons. First, their asceticism was based on the “elemental spirits of the world.” As we’ll see later in this lesson, this language refers to spiritual beings and angelic powers. Second, it was of no value in “stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” Asceticism did not enable anyone actually to resist sin, and thus it provided no benefits. The false teachers in Colossae tried to mix the true teachings of the church with Greek religious and philosophical traditions that were supposed to bring wisdom and strengthen believers against temptation. But in reality, the wisdom they offered was false, and their practices were worthless.

In addition to the problems in Colossae associated with Greek philosophy, the false teachers also promoted many practices based on Jewish law. But their use and understanding of Jewish law departed both from traditional Judaism and from proper Christian practices.

## **Jewish Law**

As we saw in our previous lesson, Paul upheld the values of the law of Moses. He was willing to accept and participate in many traditional Jewish practices for the sake of the gospel. So, if the false teachers in Colossae had employed the law in a valid way, Paul would not have criticized their use of it. His criticisms indicate that the false teachers were using Jewish teachings and practices in corrupt ways. In Colossians 2:16, Paul referred to a number of Jewish practices that the false teachers abused when he wrote this:

Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath (Colossians 2:16).

Evidently, the false teachers in Colossae stressed certain traditions that went far beyond the Old Testament law itself. These included special observances of the Jewish calendar, such as religious festivals, New Moon celebrations and the Sabbath day, as well as dietary restrictions. But they did not observe these Old Testament regulations in the way prescribed by the Mosaic law. Nor did they apply them in the way that the apostles did. On the contrary, Paul declared that their practices distorted Old Testament law and endangered the eternal destinies of those who followed them. As he wrote in Colossians 2:17, 18:

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels (Colossians 2:17, 18).

The Mosaic law did not associate holy days with the worship of angels, but with the worship of God. And it did not advocate a special diet as a means of humility or asceticism, but as a sign of being set apart as God's special people. The false teachers, however, had corrupted these laws by mixing them with idolatrous worship and pagan asceticism.

**The false teachers in Colossae probably mixed a form of Jewish legalism that focused on the minutia of the Jewish law and ascetic practices, that is, practices that denied the body or deprived the body of certain things, and used this as an addendum, we might say, to belief in Christ, that these other rules and regulations were necessary in addition to belief in Christ alone for salvation. And this list of “do this” and “don't do that,” and particularly the denial, I think, of the body and normal things that in and of themselves were not illegal, was this hyper-legalism that false teachers were promoting.**

— Dr. Jim Maples

In Colossians 2:11-12, Paul added circumcision to the list of Jewish laws the false teachers abused:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands ... by the circumcision of Christ having been buried with him in baptism (Colossians 2:11-12).

Apparently, the false teachers in Colossae were advocating a form of Christian circumcision. So, Paul associated circumcision and Christian baptism in order to teach

the Colossians that, because they had been baptized, they did not need to be circumcised.

In short, in Colossians, Paul wrote against abuses of the Mosaic law. He did not write against the law itself. Elsewhere, Paul affirmed that the law of Moses is a proper basis for Christian morality and practice, and that it teaches us many true things about God. But here in Colossians, he concentrated on refuting the specific teachings and practices of the false teachers, condemning the ways that they had corrupted particular statutes in the law. Paul insisted that the church reject these corruptions.

Besides employing Greek philosophy and adopting corrupt practices based on Jewish law, the false teachers caused problems in Colossae by promoting the worship of spiritual beings and encouraging Christians to venerate and appease these powers.

## Spiritual Beings

We see evidence that the Colossian church was courting the worship of spiritual beings in at least three ways. First, Paul wrote about the worship of angels. Second, he addressed the matter of rulers and authorities. And third, he dealt with problems related to the basic principles of this world. We should begin by looking at his mention of angel worship.

*Angels.* According to the Bible, angels are God's servants, and they have always played important roles in God's plan for his creation. God delegates many jobs to them, from spiritual warfare, to influencing national politics, to delivering messages to his people, to caring for the earthly needs of believers. And the early church was well aware of these roles. As we read in Hebrews 1:14:

Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14).

Angels really are "ministering spirits," and it's important to recognize their work. But according to the false teachers in Colossae, angels were much more than ministers. They were cosmic powers, oracles that revealed mysterious teachings to those who would perform their cultic rites and worship them. Paul directly condemned these practices in Colossians 2:18, where he wrote:

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on ... worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind (Colossians 2:18).

The false teachers claimed to have received visions from angels, and on this basis, they insisted that Christians should complete the proper rituals so that they might receive similar visions. We cannot know for sure, but it's possible that the false teachers really had experienced visions, though these would have been from demons rather than from God's holy angels. At the same time, they may have experienced self-induced or even

drug-induced ecstatic trances. Or they might simply have been lying. Whatever the case, this exaggerated view of the power and influence of angels was not uncommon in the ancient world. We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that some Jewish teachers maintained similar ideas about angels. And some Greek philosophies taught similar things about their oracles and astral powers. Sadly, the familiarity of these ideas to the Colossian Christians probably made the false teachings sound reasonable, allowing them to gain a foothold in the Colossian church.

**When the Colossians heard about angels and spiritual beings, it sounded very reasonable to them ... because it was very similar to their Greek belief system, their worship of gods. That is deeply rooted in their culture. So, when you find somebody having to say something to you that is similar to your upbringing, that you grew up with, then you have a point of affiliation. Then you have a point of connection. But the danger in that is if I use something you're familiar with just to connect with you, it may be used wrongly because it's not established on truth. And that's why Paul had to be clear by exalting Christ above all authorities, above all spiritual dominion, that it is through Christ all things are made, and unto him we have to connect and establish our being.**

— Pastor Johnson Oni

Now that we've looked at Paul's direct references to the worship of angels, we should turn to his discussion of rulers and authorities.

***Rulers and Authorities.*** In the language of the first century, the terms “rulers” and “authorities” referred to spiritual beings such as angels, or even demons. As we've just seen, the false teachers in Colossae encouraged believers to worship angels and other spiritual beings. But Paul responded to this heresy by emphasizing Christ's superiority over every power and authority in heaven and on earth. He wrote of Jesus' supremacy in Colossians 1:16:

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him (Colossians 1:16).

Here Paul mentioned thrones, dominions, rulers and authorities. “Thrones” and “dominions” translate forms of the Greek words *thronos* (θρόνος) and *kuriotēs* (κυριότης). Both words commonly referred to human kings and other earthly rulers, but they could also refer to spiritual beings. “Rulers” and “authorities,” in turn, translate forms of the Greek words *archē* (ἀρχή), and *exousia* (ἐξουσία), words that usually refer to invisible spiritual powers, such as angels and demons.

In the outlooks of the false teachers in Colossae, the angelic and demonic spiritual

authorities were significantly greater than their earthly human counterparts. The false teachers greatly exaggerated the power of angels and demons, so much so that they attributed to these invisible rulers actions and abilities that in reality belong to Christ alone. Paul pointed out their error by praising Christ as the Lord who had created all things. Rather than distinguishing between the spiritual and earthly authorities, Paul treated them as one, indicating that the spiritual and the earthly were far more similar than they were different. They were both created, and both were inferior to Christ. The real contrast to be drawn was not of the spiritual over the earthly, as the false teachers insisted, but of Christ over all. Again, as he said in Colossians 1:16:

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth (Colossians 1:16).

The false teachers thought that worshiping Christ was compatible with worshiping spiritual authorities. But Paul indicated that regardless of how the false teachers envisioned the spiritual beings they worshiped, the truth was that only evil spirits or demons allow themselves to be worshiped. God's holy angels have no part in such idolatry. And Christ does not permit the worship of his enemies. Paul addressed this point in Colossians 2:15, where he wrote:

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them (Colossians 2:15).

Through the cross of Jesus Christ, God disarmed and triumphed over the spiritual powers and authorities.

**We all recognize that there's conflict in this world, that there's a battle going on between good and evil... Our life is lived in the context of, actually, a cosmic battle between God, and all that stands in opposition to God: the powers and principalities, the authorities, the forces of evil, the forces of darkness in this world... That notion is carried through, not only in the Old Testament; it really comes to full fruition in the New Testament when Jesus comes to earth. And Jesus is, in a surprising way, a consummate warrior because he doesn't do battle with, say, the Romans who are occupying the land of Judah, but in fact, Jesus is defeating who our real enemies are — Satan and sin and the power of sin and its ultimate consequence, death. And so, you see the New Testament talking about that cosmic battle coming into focus when Jesus conquers all of the power of sin and death, conquers Satan himself, through his death and resurrection as it's expressed in 1 Corinthians 15 and also as Paul describes it in the book of Colossians.**

— Rev. Bill Burns

The spiritual powers and authorities opposed God in spiritual war. They were rebellious, evil spirits, enemies of God. They were demons, not holy angels. But through Jesus Christ, God stripped these demons of their ability to fight and humiliated them in defeat. These fallen, powerless, defeated demons were the spiritual powers worshiped by the false teachers in Colossae, the ones that Paul referred to as “rulers and authorities.”

Now that we've explored Paul's mention of angels and spiritual rulers and authorities, we're in a position to see how Paul spoke of the basic principles of this world. As we said earlier, this was yet another phrase that referred to spiritual beings.

***Basic Principles.*** In the first century, the Greek term *stoicheia* (στοιχεῖα), which may be translated “basic principles,” commonly referred to the gods and spiritual powers that were associated with the stars and planets. *Stoicheia* was also used to refer to the four basic physical elements: earth, wind, fire and water. These basic principles or elements were thought to influence and even control the fates of men and women. Paul clearly used *stoicheia* in this way in Galatians 4:8-9, where he wrote:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods... [H]ow can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world? (Galatians 4:8-9).

Here, the word “principles” translates the Greek word *stoicheia*, and it refers to “those that by nature are not gods.” That is, it refers to the demons that masquerade as pagan gods. This same meaning of *stoicheia* is also the one Paul intended in Colossians 2:8, where he condemned these basic principles:

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ (Colossians 2:8).

Paul pointed to the “elemental spirits” or *stoicheia* as the basis for the philosophy of the false teachers. In other words, he was arguing that the religious traditions of the false teachers should be rejected because they appealed to false gods. Similar ideas about the elements and spiritual powers were held by some branches of Judaism during the intertestamental period and during the first century, especially outside of Palestine. These false Jewish beliefs set the stage for the heresy that appeared in Colossae in Paul's day. In short, the false teachers in Colossae mixed Jewish legalism, pagan religion and Christianity as they encouraged the worship of astral or cosmic powers, commonly known as “basic principles” or *stoicheia*.

Now that we've surveyed the background to Paul's letter to the Colossians, we should turn to our second topic: the structure and content of this letter.

## STRUCTURE & CONTENT

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As we've seen, the church in Colossae faced some serious challenges in the first century. Unlike other churches, they apparently had never received apostolic training. Although the church had been planted by godly men, it had not been solidly grounded in the theology of the apostles. This made the Colossian Christians particularly vulnerable to false teaching. So, when false teachers began to bombard them with corruptions of Judaism and pagan idolatry, it was hard for them to tell the difference between truth and falsehood. Wisely, some in the church recognized their problem and appealed to Paul. And Paul helped them by writing to the Colossians.

Paul's letter to the Colossians can be divided into four major sections:

- A salutation in 1:1-2;
- encouragements of thanksgiving and intercession in 1:3-14;
- the main body that focuses on the supremacy of Christianity in 1:15-4:6; and
- final greetings in 4:7-18

Let's look first at the short salutation in 1:1-2.

### SALUTATION (1:1-2)

The salutation identifies the apostle Paul as the authoritative author of this letter, and mentions that the letter also comes from Paul's disciple Timothy. But it's clear that Paul is the primary author because only he signed the letter in 4:18. Also included in the salutation is a short blessing that serves as a greeting.

### ENCOURAGEMENTS (1:3-14)

The encouragements of thanksgiving and intercession, found in 1:3-14, follow reports about the Colossian church that Paul received from Epaphras. Epaphras had founded the church in Colossae. You'll recall that he also spent time with Paul during his imprisonment. While visiting Paul, Epaphras informed the apostle of the faith and love of the Colossian believers, and the two men spent much time in prayer for the Colossian church. So, when Paul wrote to them, he told them how he continually thanked God for their faith and salvation. And he let them know of his constant prayer that the Lord would bless them, especially by giving them spiritual discernment and by strengthening them to do good works.

### FINAL GREETINGS (4:7-18)

Now, before we look at the main body of the letter, we'll consider the closing portion of Colossians. In the section of final greetings in 4:7-18, Paul sent greetings to the

Colossians from the many people who were with him in prison. The closing indicates that Paul sent this letter to the Colossians in the care of Tychicus and Onesimus. Tychicus also delivered the letter to the Ephesians, and Onesimus delivered the letter to Philemon. This seems to indicate that all three letters — Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon — were written and delivered at approximately the same time. The closing also mentions a letter to the church in Laodicea, and instructs the Colossians to read that letter, as well as to share their own letter with the Laodiceans. This lets us know that even though Paul wrote these letters to specific people in particular circumstances, he also intended them to be applicable to different audiences.

**We can tell that Paul intended for his letters to apply to different audiences. First of all, just the universality of the subject matter. I mean, even though there were specific issues in Colossae, the supremacy of Christ as firstborn of creation, firstborn among the dead, the tendency or the temptation to syncretize our faith with our own cultural, national kind of context, and then the household code of how husbands and wives and families are all to relate together, I mean, those are of such universal application that we could say Paul's intention is to speak to universal issues. But it becomes more explicit toward the end of the letter when he says, "After you've read this, share this letter with these churches." In other words, distribute this once you have read it. So, Paul explicitly states his intentions at the end of Colossians, and so we're not surprised to see that this letter as well as all the others we have in Scripture were ones that circulated, and so we call them circular letters.**

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The main body of Paul's letter to the Colossians begins in 1:15 and runs through 4:6. It goes right to the main problem that troubled the church in Colossae — their failure to hold fast to the supremacy of Christianity over the false teachings that had entered their church.

### **SUPREMACY OF CHRISTIANITY (1:15–4:6)**

Paul's discussion of the supremacy of Christianity falls roughly into four main sections: First, the supremacy of Christ himself in 1:15-20; second, the supremacy of Christ's ministers in 1:21–2:5; third, the supremacy of salvation in Christ in 2:6-23; and fourth, the supremacy of Christian living over the ways of the false teachers in 3:1–4:6. We'll look briefly at each of these sections, beginning with the supremacy of Christ himself.



## Supremacy of Christ (1:15-20)

False teachers were trying to persuade the Colossian church to worship cosmic, spiritual powers. And they were encouraging an ascetic lifestyle, thinking that such harsh living would placate the spiritual powers and reap some benefit from these false gods. So, Paul began to refute these false teachings by contrasting these pathetic imposter gods with Jesus Christ. Paul insisted that Christ is the King of all creation, and that he possesses all perfections and authority. And more than this, Paul taught that the basic principles of the world are incapable of delivering the blessings of salvation, and are unworthy of reverence.

In Colossians 1:15-20, Paul touched on at least six important facets of the supremacy of Christ. Most of these details stood in stark contrast with the false teachings in Colossae. Among these details, Paul spoke of Christ as the image of God in verse 15, the firstborn of all creation, also in verse 15, the agent of creation in verse 16, the supreme Lord in verse 18, God incarnate in verse 19, and the only reconciler between God and humanity in verse 20. Let's look briefly at each of these descriptions of Christ.

***Image of God (1:15).*** First, Paul began by saying that Christ is the image of the invisible God. This description placed Christ in stark contrast to the spiritual powers extolled by the false teachers. Listen to how Paul described Jesus in Colossians 1:15, 16:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... all things were created through him and for him (Colossians 1:15, 16).

Although the Scriptures speak many times of all human beings as the image of God, here Paul had in mind something that was unique to Jesus — something associated with Jesus' power and authority over creation. When Paul used the expression "image of God," he had in mind the way the false teachers in Colossae used the expression as they borrowed it from Greek philosophy.

In some Greek philosophies of Paul's day, the universe itself was thought to be God's image. The idea was that the universe was the greatest revelation of God and that one could obtain knowledge and wisdom through its revelation. We find references to this idea in writings as old as Plato's *Timaeus*, which is from the fourth century B.C. And we see it also in Gnostic writings about the god Thrice Great Hermes that come from the second and third century A.D. So, whereas the false teachers looked to the planets and elements as the image or revelation of God, Paul pointed to *Christ* as the image of God. He adopted this Greek philosophical term, "image of God," in this way in order to show that Christ — and not the demons worshiped by the false teachers — was the ultimate revelation of God. Christ was the one to whom believers should look for supreme wisdom and knowledge of God.

***Firstborn of All Creation (1:15).*** Second, Paul described Christ as the firstborn of all creation. As before, Paul chose his words carefully to refute the false teachers. Listen again to what he wrote about Christ in Colossians 1:15, 16:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... all things were created through him and for him (Colossians 1:15, 16).

The Greek term *prōtotokos* (πρωτότοκος), here translated “firstborn,” often referred to superiority and authority rather than to order of birth. In the ancient world, the firstborn child in a family was not necessarily the one who was born first. Rather, the firstborn was the one who had the greatest rights of inheritance. He was typically the one who would lead the family after his father's death. The oldest male child was considered the “firstborn” even if he had older sisters. And beyond this, if the oldest son was demoted from his position for some reason, a younger male child could become the firstborn.

Now, we should point out that some rather prominent modern cults have wrongly understood this term “firstborn” to indicate that Christ was actually “born” before the rest of the world was created. That is, they believe that Christ was a creature and not one in substance with God the Father, nor equal to the Father in power and authority. But Paul associated Christ's status as “firstborn” with his authority and supremacy over all creation and said nothing about a time when Jesus did not exist.

When Paul said that Christ was the firstborn over all of creation, he meant that Christ was the one who possessed the authority of the Father, not that Christ was born or created before other creatures. He did not mean that Christ was part of creation, but that Christ was Lord over creation. He emphasized this to make it clear that the false gods of the false teachers in Colossae had no power or authority to give any blessings to anyone. Christ and Christ alone was the firstborn, the one who inherited all the blessings of God, and he alone could give God's blessings to others.

***Agent of Creation (1:16).*** Third, Paul also said that Christ was the agent of creation, the one through whom God created the universe. Jewish mysticism often attributed prominent roles to angels in creation — roles that the Bible ascribes to God and to Christ, but not to angels. And in Greek philosophy, the elements and other astral powers were commonly assigned similar roles. But Paul insisted that Christ is the only agent of creation. He is the Creator, and all of these other powers are inferior to him and subject to him. Listen to what he wrote in Colossians 1:16:

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him (Colossians 1:16).

As we've already seen, the words “rulers” and “authorities” refer to spiritual powers, such as those worshiped by the false teachers. And according to Paul, these rulers and authorities are all subject to Christ because he created them. Christ's priority as the agent of creation makes him far superior to everything within creation, including the greatest spiritual powers.

***Supreme Lord (1:18).*** Fourth, Paul also insisted that Christ is the supreme Lord

because God placed him as head over the church. Listen to Paul's words in Colossians 1:18:

He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy (Colossians 1:18, NIV).

Paul explained that, in addition to being the Creator, Christ is also the “head of the body, the church” and the “firstborn from among the dead.” In other words, he is Lord over the new humanity — the church — and over all those who have been raised with Christ to new life. Christ is the head over the old creation and the new creation “so that in everything he might have supremacy.” Contrary to the false teachers who had begun to influence the church in Colossae, any teaching that detracts from Christ's supreme Lordship and glorious sovereignty over all is false.

***God Incarnate (1:19).*** Fifth, Paul explained that Christ is God incarnate. This remarkable statement surpasses any claim made about the so-called rulers and authorities of Greek paganism and Jewish mysticism. Listen to Paul's words in Colossians 1:19:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19).

As Paul made clear here, although Christ is incarnate — truly a man — all the fullness of God dwells in him, making Christ the incarnation of the supreme God. The false teachers in Colossae called for the veneration of spirits, or rulers and authorities, because these spirits were thought to have a powerful influence over human affairs. And apparently, at least some in the church at Colossae had begun to submit to this teaching. But Paul taught that all the fullness of God dwells in Jesus Christ. He is the incarnation of the God who created the universe, the one that all others must obey as Lord. This makes Christ far superior to the lesser spiritual beings promoted by the false teachers.

***Only Reconciler (1:20).*** Finally, Paul exalted Christ by speaking of him as the only reconciler between God and the fallen, sinful world. Paul explained this fact about Christ in Colossians 1:19-20:

God was pleased ... through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:19-20).

God's plan, through Jesus, is “to reconcile to himself all things.” That is, Jesus Christ is the one who brings peace between God and his fallen creation “by the blood of his cross.” As a result, when Christ returns in glory, he will extend this peace to all things, “whether on earth or in heaven.”

**How can we be reconciled, declared just before a holy God? In Christ, he is not just a third party. He is not just another man. He is the God-**

man, the second person of the Godhead who takes God's own righteous requirements to himself, who stands in our place, who goes as our representative, who dies on our behalf, so that in him bearing our sin, in him satisfying his own righteous requirements, we who then believe in him are then forgiven because he stands for us. He stands as our covenant head. All that he has achieved in his death, his resurrection that gloriously demonstrates that, then is applied to us. So that we die with him. We're raised with him. Our debt has been removed, and we then can stand by faith, justified before the Father.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

From Paul's point of view, the false teachers in Colossae called for the worship of feeble powers. For the Colossians to submit to this teaching was to diminish, even steal, the glory and authority that belonged only to Christ. In the end, Paul mocked the false teachers and warned that they were leading the Colossian Christians away from Christ. The gospel, or good news, that Paul preached was that God was restoring all of creation to a sinless, pristine and eternally blessed condition. And he was doing this through Jesus Christ, and only through Jesus Christ. Through Jesus alone, sins could be forgiven and God's favor gained. There was no need to bother with the petty and powerless spirits of the false teachers. Access to God and his spiritual blessings was only available in Jesus.

In at least six ways, Paul taught that Christ had supremacy over all the rulers and authorities worshiped by the false teachers. Christ, and Christ alone, is the image of God, the firstborn of all creation, the agent of creation, the supreme Lord, God incarnate, and the only reconciler. He is superior to all the so-called gods of the false teachers in Colossae.

After focusing on the supremacy of Christianity by demonstrating the supremacy of Christ over the spiritual powers, Paul addressed a second topic: the supremacy of Christ's ministers in Colossians 1:21–2:5.

### Supremacy of Christ's Ministers (1:21–2:5)

In effect, Paul argued that because Christ is superior to the false gods, Christ's ministers are superior to those who serve the false gods. Paul's argument touched on five main ideas: the reconciliation accomplished through the Christian gospel in 1:21-23 and 2:5; Paul's own altruism in 1:24; Paul's divine commission in 1:25; the superior revelation provided in the gospel in 1:25-28 and 2:2-4; and the empowerment of Christ's ministers in 1:29–2:1.

**Reconciliation (1:21-23; 2:5).** First, Paul began his focus on the supremacy of Christ's ministers by focusing on the reconciliation that the Colossians had already experienced through the gospel. As we read in Colossians 1:22, 23:

He has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him ... [This is] the gospel that you heard ... and of which I, Paul, became a minister (Colossians 1:22, 23).

In this passage, Paul certainly highlighted Christ and what Christ had done to reconcile the Colossian believers to God. But he also drew attention to the fact that they had received the blessings of Christ through “the gospel that they heard” from him as a minister of Christ. The false teachers in Colossae encouraged people to placate demons and to find reconciliation with God through these means. But in reality, no reconciliation ever took place for them because their so-called “gospel” had no power to save. By contrast, the Colossian believers had already experienced the true reconciliation that comes through the true gospel preached by God’s true ministers, like Paul. They were already forgiven and stood before God clothed in the righteousness of Christ. And this should have encouraged them to trust Paul’s word and to reject the false teachers.

***Altruism (1:24).*** Second, Paul exalted the ministry of the gospel by pointing to his own altruism, his selfless suffering on behalf of the church. As he wrote in Colossians 1:24:

In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Colossians 1:24).

As we saw in a prior lesson, Paul’s suffering, especially while in prison, benefited the church. It provided a powerful witness to the gospel, encouraged the church, and completed the sufferings of Christ. By contrast, the false teachers in Colossae were neither imprisoned nor persecuted. By highlighting his willingness to suffer on behalf of the church, Paul made it clear that Christ’s true ministers should be trusted and followed.

***Commission (1:25).*** Third, Paul spoke of his divine commission. Unlike the self-appointed false teachers in Colossae, Paul had been appointed to his apostleship by God himself. Paul described his commission in Colossians 1:25:

I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known (Colossians 1:25).

As we see here, Paul served as an apostle “according to the stewardship from God.” He proclaimed the word of God, not his own word. In his younger days, Paul had been a zealous persecutor of the church. But then the risen Lord Jesus had appeared to him and converted him. At this time, Jesus appointed Paul to be his apostle, giving him authority to speak on Jesus’ behalf. This meant that Paul’s authority was far superior to that of the false teachers in Colossae. Paul contrasted his teachings with false teaching this way in Colossians 2:8.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit,

according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ (Colossians 2:8).

The false teachers brought the Colossians empty and deceptive teachings that rested on “human tradition” and the demonic “elemental spirits” of this sinful world. But by contrast, he taught them the truth of God that depended on Christ.

**Revelation (1:25-28; 2:2-4).** Fourth, Paul pointed out that the revelation he had received was superior to that asserted by the false teachers. Listen, for example, to Paul's words in Colossians 2:4:

I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments (Colossians 2:4).

Paul explained that the words of the false teachers deluded the believers. By contrast, his own words revealed the truth, helping Christians avoid the false teachers' deception. In fact, according to Galatians 1:15-18, Paul had spent three years in the desert of Arabia and in Damascus receiving revelations from God. The false teachers, however, relied on traditions that had been passed down through human hands. This made Paul's revelations far superior to those of the false teachers.

It was very significant that Paul's revelations came from God, and that they were not mere human inventions like the teachings of the heretics in Colossae. But even more importantly, the *content* of Paul's revelations was superior to the false teachings in Colossae. In his letter to the Colossian church, Paul described his revelations as a “mystery” that God had revealed to him, and as “treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” And Paul did not keep these treasures to himself — they were the very gospel that he preached. They were the truths of reconciliation to God and participation in his kingdom, on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, received by means of faith. This proclamation was better than anything the false teachers offered.

**Empowerment (1:29–2:1).** Fifth, Paul also described the superior empowerment of Christ's ministers, speaking of the fact that *God* gave power to his ministers. Paul did not labor in his own strength. Rather, God empowered him to serve and to suffer as Christ's apostle. The Holy Spirit gifted Paul with astounding gifts, providing him with words to speak and opportunities to speak them. And he gave him miracles to confirm his witness, so that Paul would advance the kingdom of God on earth. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:29:

I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me (Colossians 1:29).

Paul's authority, words and power came from God himself. And the false teachers in Colossae could not compare. Their ministry and their message were devoid of power and worthless in meaning.

In summary, then, we see that Paul emphasized the superiority of Christ's

ministers by writing about the reconciliation accomplished through the Christian gospel, their altruism, their divine commission, the revelation they had received, and their empowerment by the Holy Spirit.

## Supremacy of Salvation in Christ (2:6-23)

After emphasizing the supremacy of Christ himself and the supremacy of his ministers, Paul went on to insist on the supremacy of salvation in Christ in 2:6-23. Paul's discussion of the supremacy of salvation in Christ divides into two main sections: his praise to God for life in union with Christ, in 2:6-15, and his condemnation of life lived under subjection to the demonic elements, in 2:16-23. We'll consider life in union with Christ first.

*Life in Christ (2:6-15).* Paul described at least three benefits of salvation that come through union with Christ. He began with the benevolent and invigorating lordship of Christ in 2:6-10. In these verses, Paul indicated that because Christ is our Lord, we are rooted, built up and strengthened in him, and we feel great thankfulness toward him. Those who followed the false teachers were captives to the petty spiritual powers they worshiped, but those under Christ's lordship were given authority to rule with him. As Paul wrote in Colossians 2:9-10:

For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority (Colossians 2:9-10).

Christ has divine authority over "all rule and authority," but his followers have also "been filled in him." And because believers are united to Christ, they benefit from his divine authority.

Second, in 2:11-13, Paul also mentioned the spiritual vitality that believers have because we are in union with Christ. Listen to Colossians 2:12 where Paul wrote:

Having been buried with him in baptism ... you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:12).

Because we are united to Christ, believers participate not only in Christ's death, resulting in our forgiveness, but also in Christ's resurrection and life, resulting in the rebirth of our spirits and newness of life.

**Paul says that our resurrection together with Christ has huge implications for the way we live our lives. We're no longer under slavery to sin, but we are instead, according to Romans 6, enslaved to righteousness. Because Christ has been raised from the dead, we have**

**been buried with him ... and we are raised now, just as he was raised to newness of life. And so, Paul says ... that that means the way we used to live, before we became Christians, our old way of life that did not honor and please God, has now been, has now started to be set aside, and we are beginning to live a new resurrection life just as Jesus was raised from the dead.**

— Dr. Frank Thielman

Third, in Colossians 2:13-15, Paul expressed the idea that because believers are united to Christ, we obtain forgiveness from sin and are freed from attempting to earn our own salvation. As he wrote in Colossians 2:13-14:

[He forgave] us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us ... nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14).

God's law condemns fallen humanity to death. But because everyone who has faith in Christ is united to Christ in his death, we have already died the death that the law requires. He served our sentence, so that now we are free from all condemnation.

*Life Under Elements (2:16-23)*. Against the backdrop of the blessings of life in Christ, Paul also emphasized the supremacy of salvation in Christ when he condemned life lived under subjection to the demonic elements in 2:16-23. The false teachers called for the Colossians to follow the demonic elements of this world. But life under subjection to these elements places people under the tyrannical lordship of evil creatures. This results not only in judgment, but also in the loss of the blessings Christ offers. Moreover, union with Christ produces spiritual vitality, but anyone who turns from Christ to the demonic elements suffers separation from Christ and spiritual weakness. As Paul wrote in Colossians 2:19:

[They are] not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God (Colossians 2:19).

Additionally, while union with Christ grants forgiveness and frees one from the Law's condemnation, turning to demonic elements led the Colossians into the deceitfulness of asceticism. Listen to the way Paul commented on the worthlessness of asceticism in Colossians 2:23:

These [regulations] have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:23).

For at least some in Colossae, subjection to the false gods of the heretical teachers



resulted only in “asceticism and severity to the body.” It was of no use against sin. Such harsh living was supposed to lead to blessings, but the demons had no power to bless anyone. By contrast, union with Christ provides freedom rather than subjection, and truly destroys the power of sin.

By contrasting life in union with Christ and life lived under subjection to the demonic elements, Paul demonstrated that the salvation offered in the true Christian gospel was far superior to what the false teachers in Colossae offered.

Finally, after addressing the supremacy of Christ and his ministers, and the supremacy of the salvation offered in Christ's gospel, Paul turned to the supremacy of Christian living in Colossians 3:1–4:6. In this section, Paul demonstrated that the Christian lifestyle is far more ethical than the lifestyle advocated by the false teachers.

### **Supremacy of Christian Living (3:1–4:6)**

The false teachers in Colossae seem to have been very concerned with ethical living. After all, the goal of their harsh living was to avoid fleshly indulgence. And for this reason, their ethical standards or goals were attractive to the Christian church in Colossae. But there was a problem. Simply put, asceticism doesn't work. The fact of the matter is that fallen human beings lack the willpower to resist sin. So, no matter how hard we fight to avoid sin, without Christ, we always lose. To live ethically, to obey the moral standards that God has given us, we have to rely on something much more powerful than ourselves.

In some ways, Paul's teachings on Christian living resembled the teaching of the false teachers. In fact, Paul even went so far as to say that it was right to focus on heavenly and spiritual things and not on earthly things. Listen to his words in Colossians 3:2:

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth  
(Colossians 3:2).

According to Paul, we are to value spiritual and heavenly things more highly than earthly things. This perspective was shared by the ascetic teachers, at least superficially. Also like the ascetic teachers, Paul taught strongly against fleshly indulgence. For instance, in Colossians 3:5 he wrote:

Put to death ... what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity,  
passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

Paul agreed with the false teachers that fleshly indulgence is evil. But, although some of Paul's teachings may have resembled that of the false teachers, he disagreed on how to avoid sin and on many other things. And he pointed out the irony of what they proclaimed. For instance, while the false teachers in Colossae ostensibly called for devotion to heavenly things, Paul pointed out that they tried to reach that goal by

constantly focusing on earthly matters. Listen to the way Paul mocked the false teachers' instructions in Colossians 2:21 when he declared that their instructions were only:

Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch (Colossians 2:21).

Although the ascetics claimed to point to the spiritual realm, their teachings actually focused on mundane, earthly matters. The ascetics were so preoccupied with their ascetic practices that they did not bother to emphasize ideals that were truly heavenly and spiritual. Although their goal may have been spiritual, all their efforts were spent on earthly things. By contrast, Paul specifically taught how believers could focus on and strive for things that were spiritually oriented. He insisted that they cease their earthly sins, but he also told them how they could achieve this goal. Listen to his words in Colossians 3:9-11:

You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator... Christ is all, and in all (Colossians 3:9-11).

Here Paul explained that the key to ethical living is this: Believers are united to Christ — Christ is “in all.” And because of this union with Christ, we are to put off, like a cloak or garment, the “old self” and put on the “new self” that is “being renewed.” The false teachers in Colossae were not true believers. They had no new self to put on. They did not believe the gospel, and therefore, they were not united to Christ. They did not have new natures, and they were not being renewed by God. As a result, all of their attempts to avoid sin were doomed to failure. True believers, however, are united to Christ, and therefore, we are empowered to obey God's ethical standards. But Paul didn't stop with this idea. Rather, he pushed on to provide instruction in practical ways that believers can live when they put on the new self. Listen to his instructions in Colossians 3:12:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (Colossians 3:12).

Believers can succeed in ethical living by emphasizing heavenly, spiritual virtues like compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, rather than by the rigorous, harmful self-denial of asceticism. We are to focus on these matters of life rather than placating the whims of false gods. Paul's strategy for ethical living was superior to that of the false teachers in two very important ways. First, it was effective because it focused on relying on God's power rather than on our own power. Second, it was effective because it focused attention away from mere earthly matters, and onto positive virtues that come from the Spirit of God. And the final result was that Paul's strategy worked. Unlike ascetic practices which are of no value against sin, Paul's path actually made ethical living possible.

**It's one of the great truths of the New Testament that the Holy Spirit dwells in the life of the believer. I find one of the most fascinating passages where Paul talks about that the gospel is about Christ in you, Christ living in you. And he speaks on other occasions about the Spirit of Christ indwelling the believer... And the implication of that, is, well, many things. We are never alone, we've always got someone with us, Christ living within us. We're never totally powerless. There is within us the power of the risen Christ, his Spirit. We are never without the fruit of the Spirit — the fruit of the Spirit grows out of us. And that transforming power is within us, and we don't have to rely on our own energies to try and live the Christian life; we can actually be resourced to do so in the strength that Christ supplies through the same Holy Spirit.**

— Dr. Peter Walker

From this brief look at Paul's letter to the Colossians, we can see that Paul designed his letter to address the false teachers' idolatrous heresies and ineffective ways of pursuing righteousness. By contrast, Paul blessed and encouraged the Colossian believers and preached the supremacy of Christianity. He defended Christ as Lord and King and upheld the superiority of Christ's ministers. He also preached the incomparable value of salvation in Christ and taught victory over sin through Christian living. At each and every point, he made it clear that what the false teachers promised, only Christ could deliver.

Now that we've explored the background to Paul's letter to the Colossians, and its structure and content, we should turn our attention to our third subject: the modern application of Paul's letter to the Colossians. How should we, as modern Christians, apply what Paul taught the Colossians to our lives?

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## MODERN APPLICATION

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Although there are many ways we may rightly apply Paul's teaching to our modern lives, we'll highlight two types of application that correspond to what Paul himself emphasized in his letter to the Colossians. First, we'll consider the necessity of remaining loyal to Christ alone. And second, we'll look at the value of focusing on spiritual matters on a daily basis. Let's begin by looking at the necessity of remaining loyal to Christ alone.

### LOYAL TO CHRIST

In the Colossian church, the false teachers encouraged believers to mix their worship of Christ with the worship of other spiritual powers. Although these other

spiritual powers were not presented as demons, we've seen that any power they actually had, and any benefits that actually came to their worshipers, were demonic. So, whether these powers were demons or elements or angels, the Colossians should not have venerated them.

Sadly, the social climate of the first century made it hard for the Colossians to recognize Christ's superiority over all other powers. During the first century, polytheism was very popular in the Roman Empire. That is, most people believed that there were many gods and spiritual powers. And most cities, towns and villages officially acknowledged the existence of many gods and promoted the worship of many gods. For most people within the Roman Empire at this time, it was normal to worship prominent gods, such as Zeus, but also to worship many other local gods and even more household gods. So, there was great social pressure encouraging the early Christians to worship other gods as well.

In fact, when the Roman Empire began to persecute Christians during the first century, it was largely because the Christians refused to acknowledge and to worship the gods of the civic cult. Christians were often accused of making the gods angry, especially when troubles like drought, disease, and bad economic circumstances came to the empire. Now, for the most part, Roman authorities didn't demand that Christians stop worshipping Christ — one more god simply provided more protection — but only that they worship the Roman gods as well. From the first-century Roman perspective, it was only wise to worship many gods. But Christ demanded exclusive loyalty and worship. When men and women served Christ, they could not worship anything else. This is why Paul insisted that the Colossians remain steadfast in their exclusive commitment to Christ. As he wrote in Colossians 1:22-23:

[Christ] has now reconciled [you] in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel (Colossians 1:22-23).

If we do not remain faithful to Christ, then we prove that we have not been truly reconciled to God. And if we are not reconciled to God, then we do not share in the hope held out in the gospel. Simply put, if we do not remain exclusively faithful to Christ as the supreme king of creation, we are not saved. This kind of loyal devotion to Christ is of utmost importance.

Our modern world also challenges our loyalty to Christ by presenting many different gods for us to worship. Polytheism can be found in eastern religions such as Taoism, one of the three classical religions of China; Hinduism, the dominant religion of India; and Shinto, the traditional religion of Japan. And in the western world, we see many forms of "spirituality," like Satanism and witchcraft, and traditional eastern religions have become commonplace. At the same time, in modern societies, Christians are often pressured by atheism to abandon all belief in God and Christ. Christianity is often ridiculed as a primitive and barbaric religion that cannot stand the scrutiny of science. This is especially true among the highly educated.

In other cases, the philosophical relativism of modern society leads to a strong insistence on religious tolerance. As a result, all exclusive claims to truth and salvation are condemned. Christians are often accused of arrogance and intolerance and feel pressured by society to encourage everyone to find his or her own religious path, whether Christian or not. But not all pressures come from outside the church. For instance, in churches that have drifted from their commitment to the authority of Scripture, praise is now offered to “Wisdom” or Sophia, who is personified as a female deity. It is quite common, even among people who claim to be Christian, to encounter teachers who insist that all religions are valid paths to salvation — even religions that deny Christ.

The truth is that our circumstances today are not that different from the circumstances in Colossae in the first century. In one way or another, it's likely that we feel pressure to compromise our exclusive loyalty to Christ. These may be pressures to accept the validity of other religions and gods or to mix the teachings of these other faiths with our Christian faith. These pressures may come from our government, from universities and schools, from our neighbors and friends, from our families, or at times, even from our church leaders. But Paul's letter to the Colossians makes it clear that genuine Christian faith, the faith that Jesus proclaimed and Paul taught, requires us to stand strong in our exclusive devotion to Christ. Even when the world threatens us with harm, we are to insist that only Christ is worthy of worship, and only he offers eternal salvation. We must remain steadfast in our loyalty to Christ alone.

In addition to remaining loyal to Christ alone, Paul's letter to the Colossians also calls us to a second type of modern application: the value of focusing on spiritual matters every day of our lives. Although attention to earthly matters is of some value, we benefit most greatly when we approach the Christian life with our hearts set on heavenly, spiritual matters.

## SPIRITUAL FOCUS

When we come to faith in Christ, a miracle occurs. By the work of God's Spirit, our spirits are renewed within us. Before we come to faith, we are dead on the inside, unable to respond positively to God. We are God's enemies, not only because we have sinned against him and deserve his judgment, but also because we will not submit to him. But God loves us so much that he refuses to allow us to remain his enemies, and so he sends his Holy Spirit to renew our spirits. Although we never reach perfection in this life, we are always in a process of inward renewal that extends throughout our lives on earth. Time and again, we repent of our sin and submit to our Lord. For this reason, our salvation does not depend on our earthly pursuits, but on the spiritual realities of our renewed spirits and our union with Christ. And because of this, Paul's encouragement to the Colossians to focus less on earthly matters and more on spiritual ones is God's Word for us today as well.

**Paul's method of getting the church to focus on heavenly things has to do with a unique transition in which he writes his letter. If you were to look at the way he wrote to Colossian church, he first greets them,**

then addresses the things that they're looking at around them, the philosophies, the religious routines, and then he connects them to that which Christ has done, what Christ has completed in them. And in having to focus on Christ, the one that through him all things were made, he now encourages them to live this new life. This new person that they've become, setting their eyes on him. In other words, if your eyes are fully on Christ, then you're then encouraged to walk in this new life because there's a future glory, there's a future place that we're all going for.

— Pastor Johnson Oni

Theologians often describe those who have not come to faith as “unregenerate.” By contrast, the term “regenerate” is applied to those who have faith. These terms identify the state of the spirit or soul of each person. To be unregenerate is to be spiritually dead, and to be regenerate is to be spiritually alive. Those who are unregenerate are under God's judgment because of sin. Also, they have no moral ability, that is, they cannot do things that God counts as morally pure. In short, the unregenerate are not saved, and they cannot save themselves.

But, as Paul stressed in his letter to the Colossians, God has intervened in the lives of all who are regenerate. By the power of his Spirit, they are forgiven because they are united to Christ who died for their sin according to the requirements of God's law. Further, their spirits are renewed, giving them moral ability so that they are *able* to obey God, as well as moral desire so that they also *want* to obey God. It's impossible to overestimate how much our salvation is dependent on the inward spiritual change that God himself causes in us. Regeneration makes us new people. We are not just forgiven; we are also transformed. Paul described the change that takes place within true believers in Colossians 2:13, where he wrote:

You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses (Colossians 2:13).

We were once dead in our sins, meaning that we were under God's judgment. But then God made us alive and forgave our sins. We were once also dead in the sense that we had no true moral ability or desire. But, again, God made us alive. As a result, we now have the ability to desire good and to do good. When we were spiritually dead — before we were regenerated and united to Christ the King — it would have been useless for us to focus on spiritual things, or “things that are above,” even if we had wanted to. But now that we are regenerate, we are called to focus our new lives in a new direction. Our spirits have been made new. And now we recognize that the most beneficial thing for us is to turn from a focus on earthly matters and to delight in heavenly matters. This is why Paul exhorted the Colossians this way in Colossians 3:1-2:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above,

where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth (Colossians 3:1-2).

Because we are seated above with Christ, we should focus our minds on things that pertain to heaven. We are now aware that Christ is the true authority over the universe. We know how he is in control of all things. We know that he is the source of every blessing. And this knowledge should change where we find our strength every day of our lives.

Now, at times, Christians have mistakenly thought that when Paul said that we are to focus on heavenly things and not on earthly things, he meant that we should withdraw from the normal human life in order to pursue heaven without distraction. For example, some medieval ascetic monks lived as hermits, sequestered from the rest of society. Some sat in caves or on top of poles for long periods of time. Others even caused themselves physical harm. They earnestly believed that the best way to grow spiritually was to escape the influence of the physical world. But they were wrong. In fact, in some respects, they made the same mistakes that the false teachers in Colossae had made. The famous educator Booker T. Washington, founder of the school that is now called Tuskegee University, is credited as the author of this American proverb:

**One man cannot hold another down in the ditch without staying down in the ditch with him.**

In many ways, Washington applied to human relations what Paul taught about the inner lives of Christians. That is to say, if we focus all of our energies on suppressing our sinful desires, we are still focusing on sinful desires. Paul encouraged believers to put their fleshly sins to death. But Paul's point was not simply that we must adopt a new approach to earthly matters. It was also that we should refocus our attention away from earthly matters and onto the source of spiritual strength and power, our King in heaven. But the spiritual or heavenly matters Paul had in mind still require our participation in the world. Listen to his words in Colossians 3:12-16:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience... forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (Colossians 3:12-16).

To be heavenly minded is to focus on the one who has ascended to heaven, namely Christ, so that we may receive his blessings and be empowered to be more like him while we are here on earth. And notice the kinds of matters that Paul considered heavenly or spiritual. Most of them are interactive virtues, virtues that are primarily — and in some cases only — expressed toward other people, such as compassion, kindness,

humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, and peace in the context of community. These virtues cannot be exercised apart from active life in the present world.

In fact, in Colossians 3:16–4:6, Paul explained many different ways that believers can apply these virtues within the context of their many earthly relationships. For instance, he wrote that believers should admonish one another by singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs together. He directed wives to submit to their husbands, and husbands to love their wives. He instructed children to obey their parents, and parents to encourage their children. He exhorted slaves to be obedient and productive, and he commanded masters to treat their slaves in the same way that Jesus, who is the master of us all, treats his church. He asked for prayers that God would strengthen him as he proclaimed the gospel. And he directed the Colossians to be diligent and wise when their own opportunities for evangelism arose. All of these instructions pertain to spiritual or heavenly matters. And yet they can only be carried out through active involvement in the present world.

For Paul, to be heavenly or spiritually minded is to reflect deeply on how wonderful heaven is right now, and to orient our entire lives toward Christ our King who reigns in heaven. It is to concentrate, not on mere outward behaviors, but on how Christ works within us to perform good works. It is to love others, to forgive others, to be kind and gentle and humble. The letter to the Colossians calls us today, much like it called the Colossians in the first century, to give ourselves to honor Christ as our King and to build the kingdom of God right here, right now, on this earth as it already is in heaven.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we've taken a close look at the apostle Paul and his association with the believers in Colossae. We've explored the background of Paul's letter to the Colossians, as well as its structure and content. Finally, we've discussed some of the ways we need to make modern application of Paul's teachings to the Colossians.

Paul's letter to the Colossians contains many important lessons for us today. It teaches us about Christ's supremacy, and of the high regard we should have for his apostles and their teachings. It explains our role in the kingdom of God, and the great salvation we now enjoy in Christ. And it encourages us to live with spiritual attitudes, as people who already participate in heaven, and work to bring our heavenly values to earth. As we move forward in our Christian lives, remembering the lessons Paul taught in this letter will lead us to extol Christ, the great King of heaven. And we'll find renewal deep within so that we may live through him and for him in this world.



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