

## Monday - Colossians 2:6-7

I desperately need the encouragement of this passage. My guess is that a lot of you do too. I need it because of what it tells me about my past and my present. Earlier in Colossians we noted how Paul emphasized our future, or the hope we have in Christ of inheriting and experiencing eternal and unchanging glory (see Col. 1:5,21-23,27). But here in Colossians 2:6-7 it is the past and present that concerns us.

In order to see this we need to take note of how this passage is translated in both the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Version. Although I typically use the former, the latter provides us with a more accurate and literal rendering of Paul's words. Here is the ESV translation of vv. 6-7 - "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

Compare that with the NASV - "Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude." Did you see the difference? According to the NASV, we "have been" firmly rooted in Christ and are "now being" built up in him. I won't go into the technical distinction between the perfect passive participle and the present passive participle in the original Greek text, but I think you can see it for yourself from this English translation.

I HAVE BEEN rooted in Christ! So, too, have you if you believe in him for life and salvation. I AM BEING built up in Christ! So, too, are you if you believe in him for life and salvation. And that's why I'm so profoundly encouraged by this text. Let me explain. This world can be pretty brutal at times; in fact, most of the time. People disappoint us. We disappoint them. The flesh gets the upper hand. Satan is relentless in his assault, whether by accusation or temptation or taunting. Circumstances get out of hand and dreams are shattered. Society as a whole just seems to

unravel before our eyes. And worst of all, I begin to wonder if my life is going anywhere or producing anything of value.

That's why I'm so wonderfully encouraged by Paul's choice of words (and verb tenses) in Colossians 2:6-7. No matter how tenuous and free-floating life sometimes seems, I "have been rooted" in Jesus Christ! God has graciously seeded my soul into the soil of Christ's unchanging and unconquerable grace. My life is rooted in him. My hope is grounded in his goodness. This is my identity. This is my security. This is my strength when I feel like I'm wandering aimlessly and hopelessly through one disappointment after another. Whatever I may encounter, whether good or bad, of this I may be certain: I have been rooted in Christ!

But what about those times when so little spiritual progress is being made? Again, it feels like I'm stuck in concrete, immobile, immovable, unchangeable. That's when I remind myself once more of Paul's words: Not only have I been rooted in Christ in the past, I am being built up in Christ even now, in the present. I may not always see it or feel it or be aware of major developments. In fact, there are times when I feel like I'm regressing rather than progressing. If I'm moving at all, it must be backwards!

No! Paul assures us that however imperceptible it may be, we are being built up in Christ. We are ever and always under on-going construction. A brick here, a board there, but always and persistently being built up by divine grace. Yes, every so often we dismantle what God has done, tearing down his handiwork and experiencing momentary, though painful, disintegration. But God will not give up on us. What he began by grace, he'll finish by grace. The building will be completed. Our souls will grow in conformity to Christ and one day we will be like him for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:1-3).

I don't know about you, but it helps for me to know that. I desperately need to be reassured that my life, body, soul, and spirit are rooted in Christ and what he has done for me. Being

rooted and grounded in my own good intentions or the promises of other people or whatever worldly and financial success I might attain doesn't do much when life stinks and my soul sinks. I need to know that I'm rooted in him.

I desperately need to know that he's still at work in me, slowly but surely building up what I've torn down, conforming and shaping my soul to look like his. Often times our spiritual and moral failures look massive and seem to dwarf our achievements. But I'm assured of this: nothing will lead him to forsake his work in me.

In fact, Paul goes on to say that we are also "being established" in the faith. The word here was often used to describe the practice of guaranteeing legal contracts. God has bound himself to me. He has formally pledged himself to my growth in grace in his Son. He has sealed the document of ownership. I am his and he is mine and he will continue to confirm and solidify me in the experience and knowledge of all that he has made known of himself and his purposes for me in Christ.

There's only one appropriate response to such breathtaking realities: thanksgiving! No wonder Paul's final phrase in v. 7 reminds us of the importance of "abounding in thanksgiving" (ESV) or "overflowing with gratitude" (NASV).

## **Tuesday - Colossians 2:8-10**

So far in our study of Colossians I've avoided saying anything in depth about the problem that led Paul to write this letter in the first place. There is good reason for that. I long ago lost count of the number of theories concerning the essence of the so-called "Colossian heresy" (it probably consisted of an odd mix of gnosticism, asceticism, and an inordinate emphasis on the importance of angels; some have contended there was also a Judaizing element in it).

But we can no longer afford to ignore this issue, and the reason is obvious. Here in Colossians 2:8-10 Paul explicitly warns his readers: "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. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority."

There are four observations that need to be made.

First, contrary to what some have said, Paul is not condemning all philosophy, as if the discipline is itself inherently dangerous. I've actually run into a few individuals who, upon entering college, believed that this passage prohibited them from majoring in Philosophy. "The idea of a 'Christian philosopher,'" said one, "is a contradiction in terms." Now, there may well be reasons why one should opt for another major, but this verse isn't one of them!

Paul is clearly referring to one specific expression of philosophical thought that was a threat to the faith of the Colossians in the first century (note the presence of the definite article, although left out by most English translations, hence more literally, "THE philosophy . . ."). This is a philosophical perspective characterized by "empty deceit." It is deceitful, as over against "the word of truth" (Col. 1:5). It is empty, as over against the glorious riches (Col. 1:27) and treasures (Col. 2:3) that are in Christ.

Philosophy, more generally considered, is an extremely helpful discipline designed to help us think through ultimate issues such as the existence of God, the meaning of life, the nature of good

and evil, how we use language, and a variety of other tough topics. Philosophical reasoning, therefore, that is subject to the final authority of Scripture can shed great light on our search for and understanding of truth.

Second, on the other hand, Christians do need to be cautious about any form of philosophy that is "not according to Christ" (v. 8), That is to say, if it is in any way contrary to the revelation of God in Christ or diminishes from his supremacy and glory, it is to be shunned.

That Paul has in mind a particular philosophy that detracts from the centrality of Christ and undermines our confidence in his sufficiency to be and do for us all that we need is evident from vv. 9-10. Note the word "for" with which v. 9 begins. Paul's point is that "because" ("for") all the fullness of the divine nature dwells in Christ and "because" we have been made complete in him and in no other, we have no need for human reasoning that purports to give us something that Christ didn't provide. Any philosophy (or theology) that says, "Christ was necessary, but not sufficient; we have more, we have the 'fullness' of divine wisdom and power that isn't available merely in a relationship with Jesus Christ," is demonic and must be rejected.

Third, the philosophy that Paul condemns is "according to human tradition" (v. 8). In other words, it is earthly in origin. This is a philosophy that was conceived in the mind of man and did not come by means of divine revelation. It may well be compatible with and confirm human traditions, and make sense when looked at from a this-worldly perspective, but it has nothing in it of God.

Fourth, and perhaps worst of all, this philosophy is "according to the elemental spirits of the world." Since the Greek word translated "elemental" (the word "spirits" is not in the original text) was employed in the ancient world to refer to the letters of an alphabet, it may be used here as a reference to first principles or the fundamental elements of something, hence the rudimentary concepts of human thought or the basic ideas of human reasoning.

But it is more likely that by this word (stoicheia) Paul is referring to spiritual beings, i.e., demons, that were thought to be active within and exercising influence over the physical universe. In other words, this would be another way of referring to those spiritual beings which Christ created and over which he exercises sovereign rule, as well as those demonic spirits that Paul will soon declare (Col. 2:15) were defeated by means of the cross.

If this is the case, no wonder Paul warned them so strongly lest they be taken captive. There is demonic energy behind any philosophy, says the apostle, that undermines or detracts from or tries to supplement the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. He, and he alone, is truly enough! He is all we will ever need.

The NASV makes this clear by translating the first half of v. 10 as, "in Him you have been made complete." There is fullness in only one: Jesus! In him, and therefore in no one else, you will find every resource, every truth, and all power. Look again at Colossians 2:3 where Paul declared that it is "in him" that we find all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Instead of "made complete," this word has also been translated "you have been filled" or even "fulfilled." The same verb is used to describe Christians as being "filled" with the "fruit of righteousness" (Phil. 1:11), "joy" and "peace" (Rom. 15:13), as well as "goodness" and "knowledge" (Rom. 15:14), not to mention the "Spirit" himself (Eph. 5:18)! The false teachers tried to convince the Colossians that the fullness they desired was unattainable in Christ alone. Paul responds by reminding them that everything they need to be complete, full, and fulfilled is in Jesus, and Jesus alone.

The "Colossian heresy" no longer exists in precisely the form it did in Paul's day. But there is still great relevance in his words of warning. We must be diligent, constantly on guard, and ever alert to those deceitful and ultimately destructive philosophies and theologies that to the slightest degree draw us away from reliance on Christ and his all-sufficient grace.

Any idea or system of thought that would suggest he is not supreme and sovereign or that he is not infinitely and exclusively worthy of our absolute devotion and adoration is demonic at its core. Beware, says the apostle, of any such philosophy. Identify it. Denounce it. Deliver others from its destructive clutches.

### **Wednesday - Colossians 2:11**

The apostle Paul was many things, but "politically correct" wasn't one of them! He rarely shied away from using graphic and often gruesome language if he thought it effective in making a point. If he thought he could help people he wasn't averse to offending them to do it.

How else does one account for the language of Colossians 2:11? There Paul declares that in Christ "you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ."

It's not altogether clear why Paul abruptly introduces the subject of circumcision at this point in his argument. Perhaps the heretics at Colossae were insisting on physical circumcision as a condition for full acceptance with God (although there's little evidence for that; indeed, were it true, one would expect him to explicitly denounce the practice somewhere in Colossians, but he doesn't). Whatever the case, Paul's point is unmistakable: the only circumcision that has any religious significance is a spiritual one. Let me try to explain this by taking each phrase separately.

Physical circumcision was the token or seal of the covenant God made with Abraham and his seed. It was the distinctive sign, the ethnic badge, so to speak, of an Israelite in covenant relationship with Yahweh. But it was always intended to symbolize an inward, altogether spiritual cleansing and purification from sin.

When Paul declares that we "were circumcised" (v. 11a), I'm inclined to believe he is referring to our conversion. In other words, we experienced a spiritual circumcision of the heart at the time of our regeneration. This is what Paul had in view in Romans 2:28-29 where he said that true circumcision is not "outward and physical" (v. 28) but is "a matter of the heart, by the Spirit" (v. 29). See also 2 Corinthians 3:3 and Philippians 3:3.

Paul is referring to our identification with Christ in his death on the cross. On this view, to say "you were circumcised" would be another way of declaring, in obviously metaphorical language, "you died." When Christ died, when he experienced

"circumcision" by the stripping away of his physical body in death, we died.

Paul describes this circumcision as one that is "made without hands" (*acheiropoietos*). This word was typically used in the New Testament to contrast what is made by humans with what is made by God. It also points to the contrast between the external material aspects of the old order of Judaism under the Mosaic covenant and the internal spiritual efficacy of the new order under the New covenant (Mk. 14:58; Acts 7:48; 17:24; Heb. 9:11,24).

Thus, to speak of something "not made by human hands" or "made without hands" (*acheiropoietos*) is to assert that God himself has created it (as in the case of the temple that Jesus would build in three days in Mk. 14:58, as well as the heavenly house [i.e., body] which believers receive at death in 2 Cor. 5:1). Paul's point is that the circumcision performed in the flesh with human hands is no longer the real or spiritually meaningful circumcision (note especially Galatians 5:6 – "for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love").

Paul says it was achieved by a "putting off the body of the flesh" (v. 11). This is most likely a reference to the physical body and death of Christ himself. The only other place this phrase appears in the New Testament is in Colossians 1:22 where it refers to the physical body of Christ, and the three earlier uses of "flesh" in Colossians all denote physical flesh (see Col. 1:24; 2:1,5).

Thus, the "putting off the body of flesh" does not refer to the believer's experience but to the violent stripping away of Christ's physical body in his death on the cross.

When we combine this phrase with the one that follows ("by the circumcision of Christ") we see that "the body of flesh was stripped off when Christ was circumcised, that is, when he died; the whole statement is 'a gruesome figure for death' . . . Here is a circumcision which entailed not the stripping off of a small portion of flesh but the violent removal of the whole body in death" (O'Brien, 117).

As just noted, when Paul then refers to "the circumcision of Christ" at the conclusion of v. 11, he does not mean his circumcision as a Jewish infant of eight days (cf. Luke 2:21), but has in view the literal death of Christ. In other words, Paul envisions the crucifixion itself as a circumcision.

It's not a pleasant image and these are not easy words, but it sure gets the point across! It is not by "human hands" (whether our effort, good intentions, or a reformed life) but by the Spirit of God that our hearts have been circumcised and renewed and regenerated unto life eternal.

## Thursday - Colossians 2:13-14

Most who are reading this are in some form of financial debt. Blessings to those of you who are not! But the majority of us owe money, either on a car or a home or a student loan, or something of the sort. Although it can be burdensome, most of us can at least see a light at the end of the tunnel. We are energized by the hope that one day it will be paid in full and we will receive from our creditors a piece of paper releasing us from any further obligation.

But to be burdened with a debt from which you will never be set free is simply too much to comprehend. To owe a debt that you know you can never pay off is psychologically devastating. Extend that indebtedness, and the penalty it incurs, into eternity and it becomes horrific beyond words.

Such was the reality of our spiritual indebtedness to God . . . until Jesus paid it all! This is the imagery Paul employs in Colossians 2:13-14 to describe the reality of having our sins forever forgiven: "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

The translation "record of debt" (ESV) reflects terminology often used with reference to an IOU, that is to say, a signed acknowledgement of indebtedness. It is something similar to our promissory note today in which the debtor affixes his/her signature to a document that binds the individual to pay the full amount by a certain date. Without using the same terminology Paul nevertheless makes the same point in Philemon 17-19 where he says, "So if you consider me your partner, receive him [Onesimus] as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it . . ." In other words, Paul was giving Philemon an IOU signed with his own hand, in which he obligated himself to pay in full whatever Onesimus might have owed.

What was this "spiritual promissory note" in Colossians 2:14? Was it the Mosaic Law with its "commandments and ordinances" (Eph. 2:15)? If so (and this is an issue very much in dispute), Paul's point would be that the Jewish people were debtors to obey it in full. In the case of Gentiles, their conscience bound them to keep the moral law (cf. Romans 2:14-16).

Paul not only says that this "record of debt" was "against" us (ESV), insofar as we are guilty for having failed to pay it, but that it also poses a very real threat to us (the NASV brings this across with its phrase, "which was hostile to us"). The threat consists of the penalty that we incur for having failed to pay it in full. What was the penalty for nonpayment? Not just a bad credit record. Not the repossession of our property. Not merely imprisonment. The penalty was death!

Here again is the glorious good news of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. The way God forgave us all our trespasses (v. 13b) was "by canceling" our indebtedness to him. The word translated "canceling" has the sense of blotting out or erasing. God has wiped clean the slate! "I, I am he," declares the Lord, "who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43:25).

But note well. God didn't simply tear up the note, so to speak, and throw it away. He didn't say, "Don't worry folks. We'll just let bygones be bygones." The infinitely righteous One cannot pretend that our indebtedness never existed.

Instead, he cancelled the IOU of our spiritual obligation by "nailing it to the cross"! Some see here an allusion to the ancient practice of affixing to the cross an inscription of the crimes for which the person was being executed. If so, then God nails the accusation against us to the cross of Christ.

In any case, it is critical that we know there was no magic wand that waved off our guilt and made it disappear. God's justice and holiness are at stake here, no less so than our eternal destiny. That is why the payment must be made in full. We were buried beneath a mountain of spiritual bankruptcy. But God took that signed

confession of indebtedness which stood as a perpetual witness against us and canceled it in the death of Christ.

We are no longer in default on the debt because Jesus paid it all! Whatever we owed, he paid. Whatever penalty we incurred, he endured. Well did the hymn writer declare: "My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin not in part but the whole, was nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! O my soul."

### **Friday - Colossians 2:16-23**

This paragraph is probably the most difficult one in the book of Colossians to interpret. It is also difficult to apply, given the fact that the false teaching that provoked Paul to write what he did doesn't find a perfect counterpart in our day and time. But there are enough parallels between what the Colossians faced in the first century and what we face today to make our study of this text relevant and meaningful.

Perhaps the best way to unpack this passage is to provide you with a summary of its argument. I encourage you to carefully read the text as it is found in the ESV below, and then to prayerfully read through my brief synopsis of what I understand it to mean. In subsequent meditations we will return to this paragraph several times to focus on specific items that are of special concern for us today. Here then is Colossians 2:16-23.

"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 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, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" – (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."

And now for my summation of what Paul is saying.

The false teachers claimed that they were able to attain a heightened form of spirituality and holiness independently of Jesus Christ (v. 19). At its heart, then, this false teaching advocated a pathway to fullness and favor with God that refused

to rest satisfied in all that we have in Jesus Christ alone (similar to what Paul said earlier in 2:1-10).

In order to achieve this elite status, they insisted that a person must follow a rigorously ascetic approach to life. This entailed abstinence from strong drink (most likely wine) and certain kinds of food (perhaps meat) (v. 16a). One must also be meticulous in the observance of certain religious festivals and holy days (v. 16b).

This particular form of asceticism required that one deny himself basic bodily needs and be willing to endure other forms of physical mistreatment (vv. 18, 23; I can't help but think of Silas, the albino Opus Dei monk made [in]famous in Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code").

The leaders of this movement had created a long list of proscribed activities from which one must be diligent to abstain (vv. 21-22). If a person proved faithful in abiding by these extra-biblical and ascetic practices, and engaged in fervent worship of angels (v. 18a), one might expect to receive religious visions in which things inaccessible to the ordinary believer are seen and experienced (v. 18b). All this served to mark them out as spiritually superior when compared to the average individual.

The apostle's response to such alleged "religious" behavior is pointed and unequivocal. He tells us that we should not let such people judge us as inferior or disqualify us from attaining the ultimate prize (i.e., fellowship and acceptance with God) simply because we don't follow their instructions (vv. 16, 18). After all, Old Testament religious festivals and holy days were a mere shadow pointing to Jesus Christ in whom they are all fulfilled (v. 17). In other words, if we have him, we don't need them.

As much as you might think that this sort of "religious" commitment is the height of spirituality, it is in fact the product of fleshly and ungodly thoughts (v. 18) and is the result of refusing to seek strength and guidance and growth from God through the person of Jesus Christ (v. 19).

After all, if you have died with Christ (as vv. 11-15 indicate you have), why would you want to go on living as if the world and those demonic spirits that seek to control it are in charge of your life (v. 20)? So resist their efforts to enslave you (v. 20)! Fight against the inclination to submit to their demands and decrees (vv. 20-21). They are obsessed with religious activities and material things that will ultimately decay and perish and have no place in the life of the age to come (v. 22a). Furthermore, their approach to "godliness" is man-made; it didn't come from God (v. 22b). They made it up themselves to promote their own religious agenda (v. 23).

The allure of such behavior is that on the surface it looks so spiritual! It appears wise and effective in gaining control over one's fleshly desires (v. 23). But it does no such thing. Afflicting the body or demanding of oneself practices that the Bible nowhere endorses may look like you are uniquely committed to God and on your way to defeating temptation and conquering the impulses of your flesh, but it is all an illusion (v. 23).

Clearly Paul is addressing a particularly lethal form of legalism that was threatening the life and freedom and joy of the Colossian church. Our next task will be to unpack particular items in this spiritually destructive perversion of true Christianity.