

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 32

Paul's Letter to Colossians

Popular singer/songwriter John Mayer was in concert in Houston recently. Mayer has a song that strikes a chord in my heart. Entitled "Stop this Train," the song speaks of the fast passing of time and the futility of trying to make it stop:

No I'm not color blind; I know the world is black and white. I try to keep an open mind, but I just can't sleep on this tonight. Stop this train. I want to get off and go home again. I can't take the speed it's moving in. I know I can't, but honestly, won't something stop this train?

Don't know how else to say it; I don't want to see my parents go. One generation's length away from fighting life out on my own. Oh come on stop this train. I want to get off and go home again. I can't take the speed it's moving in. I know I can't, but honestly, won't someone stop this train.

I'm so scared of getting older; I'm only good at being young. So I play the numbers game to find a way to say my life has just begun.

Had a talk with my old man. Said, "help me understand." He said, "turn 68, you'll renegotiate. Don't stop this train. Don't for a minute change the place you're in. Don't think I couldn't ever understand. I tried my hand -- tried honestly. We'll never stop this train."

Once in a while when its good, it'll feel like it should -- and they're all still around and you're still safe and sound and you don't miss a thing -- till you cry when you're driving away in the dark singing, "Stop this train." You want to get off and go back home again. I can't take the speed this thing is moving in. I know I can't, cause now I see...I'm never going to stop this train.

There is wisdom in seeing that earthly life has its limits. The Psalmist prayed, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). As we understand that life is not TIVO or a DVD -- it does not have a rewind button, or even a pause button -- we reach a point of focusing on today, on the moment. Many people staring death through the eyes of a terminal illness emphasize the place of appreciating and caring for each day.

Consider how that might apply to Paul in his Roman imprisonment. Paul's life was in danger from the courts, but in truth, Paul's life had been in danger many times before. Paul was not afraid of dying, but he was conscious of the need to maximize each moment of life. From his Roman incarceration, Paul wrote, "Walk

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in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time” in Colossians 4:5. It was part of a letter of teaching in theology and doctrine as well as the basics of daily Christian living. We consider that letter today.

COLOSSIANS

The church at Colossae is new to us in our study of Paul. Paul had not started the congregation, nor had he visited it.¹ Paul’s knowledge of the church there came from Epaphras, a missionary Paul knew while in Rome.² Paul likely sent this letter with Tychicus at the time Tychicus was taking Ephesians³ to the churches around Ephesus.⁴ This makes sense because the most direct way from Rome to Colossae would go into the port at Ephesus first (120 miles away).

What we know about Colossae and its issues we have to glean from Paul’s letter. Like listening to one side of a telephone conversation, we are able to make out some of the issues Paul was confronting, while some remain cloaked in mystery and ambiguity. Even where we are unsure of the issues that prompted Paul’s writing, we are still able to appreciate what Paul had to say. That is one of the beauties of Paul’s epistles that are saved in Holy Scripture.

Paul begins his letter setting out his authority as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, adding that Timothy was a co-writer. Immediately, Paul shows his love and caring for the church noting his continual prayers on their behalf. The prayers express thanksgiving to God for the faith in the church and the love of the church for the saints everywhere. Their faith and love stem from their blessing they could be sure was laid up for eternity in God’s presence. This future bears its fruit in the present as faith grows among the believers. Epaphras, who had taught the church in Colossae, informed Paul of the ways God worked in their lives.

Paul prayed not only thanksgiving for the Colossians, but he also petitioned God on their behalf. Paul wanted God to fill them with the “knowledge of his will in

¹ Col. 2:1 (“For 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”).

² Col. 1:3-7 (“We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith...just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf”); Col. 4:12 (“Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers...”).

³ Ephesians and Colossians have a number of thoughts in common and are called by some scholars “the twin epistles”

⁴ Col. 4:7 (“Tychicus will tell you all about my activities...”); Eph. 6:21 (“So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything”).

all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord” (Col. 1:9-10). Paul wanted to see the church bear fruit in good works as they grew in their knowledge of God. For Paul, growing in knowledge of God was growing in intimacy with him resulting in greater works on God’s behalf.

Paul wanted the Colossians strengthened in their walks with God’s power. God’s power would bring God glory while it grew in the Colossians’ endurance and patience with joy. The endurance, patience, and joy flow from God’s power in multiple ways. God’s power has qualified us to share in the inheritance of eternity with the saints. His power also delivered us from the reign of darkness into the Son’s kingdom. God did this by redeeming us and forgiving our sins in Jesus.

After praying for the Colossians, Paul begins discussing the wonders of Christ. Previously, Paul worked against Jesus of Nazareth, tried to destroy his followers, and challenged the idea that Christ was Messiah. But after meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was converted in heart and mind. Then, Paul read scriptures with clarity as spiritual scales fell from his eyes. Over the decades since, Paul had many opportunities to work through the scriptures with Jews, to work through philosophies with Gentiles, and to work through the implications of the Lord Jesus with others in the church. Paul’s voice lights up from the ink as we read what Paul had to say of Jesus:

Jesus

- The image of the invisible God
- The Firstborn of all creation
- Who created all things
- Through whom all things were created
- For whom all things were created
- Before all things
- Holds all things together
- The head of the church (the body)
- The beginning
- The firstborn from the dead
- Preeminent in all things
- In whom the fullness of God dwelt
- Through whom all things are reconciled

Jesus, in all these ways/roles, has changed who believers are, what believers do, and where believers are headed. Believers were once alienated from God, hostile, and perpetrators of evil. But by his death, Jesus reconciled believers from their past to present them as holy and blameless before God. This is for the believer who continues stable and steadfast in faith. It is for this reconciliation that Paul has spent his life as a minister.

Paul gladly toiled to present this truth. Even as his ministry brought him suffering and physical pain, he gladly endured these problems as fulfilling the role he had in discharging God's plan for him to teach and proclaim the mystery of the ages. This is the mystery of Christ coming into the life of Jewish and Gentile believers as the confident expectation of the coming glory in the age to come. Paul willingly gives all his energy and more, the energy God supplies, to proclaim this truth with necessary warnings as the believers are brought to maturity.

Paul struggled to minister to the Colossians, the Laodiceans, and all the disciples who have not ever actually met him. Paul wants their hearts encouraged and knitted together in love so that they might reach the riches of full assurance of knowing and understanding Christ, God's mystery revealed. In Christ are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and the Colossians need to know that. They need never accept the delusions of those who teach anything to the contrary. No knowledge or mysteries are found beyond what is revealed and found in Jesus Christ. That is the faith that Paul rejoices to find the church standing firmly upon.

The Colossians are to walk in Jesus as Lord. They started their Christian life, they took root, in the recognition and acknowledgement of his Lordship; they should not change their position on that issue as they grow up!

The depths of knowledge and wonders of life are found in Jesus, not in human tradition or philosophy that deceitfully seems to offer something beyond the revelation of Christ. Think about it: In Jesus Christ, ***God's fullness dwells***. The ***believer has this same Jesus filling him/her***, as Jesus is the head and authority of the body. Why would anyone turn to another philosophy for answers? Who has more depth or answers than God in his fullness?

God has taken the believer and marked him, just as circumcision marked the Jews. But God's mark on the believer is beyond something done by human hands. When the believer was immersed,⁵ the believer was buried with Jesus. God's

⁵ Our Bibles use the English translation "baptized" here, but "baptized" in the Greek means "immersed." Because a number of Christian traditions now practice a baptism that involves something less than full immersion, we use the more direct translation into English of "immersion." This more literal translation keeps Paul's image of burial (into water as opposed to earth) and resurrection (lifting out of the water as opposed to earth).

power that resurrected Jesus was at work in the believer as the believer was raised from the immersion by faith. God made alive one who was previously dead in his/her sins or trespasses. God forgave the believer his/her sins. In a legal sense, God cancelled the debt tied to sin, nailing it to the cross, and disarming the adversary/accuser through the victory of the cross.

This is why the Colossians need not let another pass any judgment on them in regard to rules of religious ritual that were simply in place to foreshadow the coming Messiah and his reign. Issues like what food or drink is acceptable (laws of kosher diet), maintaining the Jewish festivals, even keeping Sabbath. These were no longer marks of greater spirituality. Similarly, outside the Jewish law itself, practices of denying the body (“asceticism”), higher visions, claimed divine messages of angels, etc. These ideas that seem to elevate some to super spirituality are without merit in themselves. The merit comes in holding fast to Jesus and his body, growing and working together in love and purpose.

When we died to sin, we died to the world as well. Why after dying to this world with its human rules and regulations (“do not touch or handle or taste,” etc.) would a believer resubmit to them? Especially when they offer only the appearance of religion when in fact they serve no real purpose? The rules that heap self-denial on the body never work to really stop the selfishness inherent in the old man!

As people who have died to Christ and were then raised with Christ, believers should seek the things of Christ! These are the eternal matters that count to the one who sits at God’s right hand! Believers should set our minds on these things, not on the things of the old earth and old life! Believers are hidden within Christ at God’s right hand. Let believers be concerned with the things of Christ.

When Paul wrote of not regarding the rules of human concoction, Paul never meant to imply or teach that one was free to do as one wished without regard to morality. To the contrary, this teaching also means that believers should have no part of old sinful ways. Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, coveting (which is really a form of idolatry by valuing something over God and his supply) are not part of the believer’s walk. These are the things that God is coming to destroy! These are the things that are destructive to people, and as such, are the subject of God’s holy wrath.

Even though believers have such sin in their past, it is no longer to be in their lives. Believers should put away anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk. No more lying. Believers should put off the old self and walk as the new life. This is a life as a believer, whether Jew, Greek, circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarian, or any other categories. There are really only two groups, the saved regenerate born again believer and the unsaved degenerate.

The negative behaviors of the old man are replaced by the graces of God. The believer is to be different from the world with compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Forgiveness of each other is a hallmark of the believer. It all flows out of love, the real sign and seal that bind the believing community into one body. This is the body where the peace of Christ rules.

In this body, believers live in gratitude as the word of Christ indwells the believer and the body. The believers teach and admonish one another in wisdom. They sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with hearts of thanksgiving. Everything the believer does, everything the believer says, everything is to be done in light of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, with grateful hearts to the one who put us into Christ.

For example, in practical every day terms of home life, wives should submit to their husbands in the manner that is fitting in the Lord. Husbands should love their wives in the manner fitting in the Lord. Parents should rear their children in a manner fitting in the Lord. Slaves should obey their masters sincerely as is fitting with the Lord. Masters should treat their slaves as is fitting with the Lord. Everyone needs to see his/her actions in light of Christ and the service we owe Jesus our Lord.

Chapter 4

The believer's life should constantly be in communication (prayer) with God. Paul wanted the Colossians to pray with thanksgiving over their lives and his as well. Paul wanted prayer that he would have even more open doors to spread the message of Jesus, and that when the doors opened, Paul would share the gospel with clarity.

The Colossians needed to be cognizant of how they walked not only in the body but also before the world and its unbelievers. They needed to make the best use of the time. Their speech should always be gracious, "seasoned with salt."

Paul has a lot going on in his own life that he does not write about, instead noting that Tychicus, who was likely bringing the letter, would fill the church in with the details. Paul adds that he is sending his "faithful and beloved brother" Onesimus back to the church as a fellow Christian. More on Onesimus next week when we read Philemon!

Paul has a number of other personal ties with the church that are worth mentioning. Paul wanted the Colossians to share this letter with the nearby church at Laodicea. He also thought it useful that the Colossians read the Laodicean letter which no doubt prompted some of Paul's concerns expressed in this letter.

Paul closes by writing his own name in greeting with an add-on that the Colossians remember the chains he wore. Paul then blesses the church with God's grace.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).

We struggle at times to understand the nature of Christ. How Christ could be fully God and yet fully human? How can Christ be different from God the Father and yet God is still one (Christians are not polytheists!)? Paul does not address these issues directly in our terminology. Still, we do have from him affirmations that we claim as orthodox Bible believing Christians. In Colossians, there are a number of these affirmations. In Jesus we see God. We see God fully. Jesus is not a part of God, nor does part of God indwell Jesus. In Jesus, the fullness of God dwells. This is the Jesus that resides in our hearts, who stakes his claim on our souls for eternity. This is the one who has brought us into reconciliation with God. God himself is at work in our hearts just as Jesus is at work. We may not understand it fully, but that does not make it any less true.

2. “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17).

Do everything? *Everything*? Is Paul sure? Oh yes, he is very sure! Paul is extremely emphatic! When Paul wrote this section, he stresses three times that *all things* should be done in the name of Jesus (meaning “in light of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done”). Paul wrote: (1) Whatever you do, (2) whether in word or deed⁶ (3) do everything. Authentic mature Christianity is not merely something that occurs on a Sunday morning. It is found in the nitty-gritty of each day’s activities and frustrations. It is found in the mundane as well as the exciting. It is found in the murky waters of challenging ethics and worrisome decisions. “Do *EVERYTHING* in the name of the Lord Jesus!”

3. “Walk in wisdom ... making the best use of the time” (Col 4:5).

This takes us back to the beginning of this class. There is no pause or rewind button in our life. Each moment that passes is gone. May God help us make the most of each passing moment, of each opportunity! Live each moment recognizing its uniqueness. Live each moment for God.

⁶ We should make note that in Greek thought, everything could be divided into two categories: things that pertained to ideas and things that pertained to actions. These were categories of “words” and “deeds.” So here, by mentioning “in word or deed” Paul is saying “everything” in yet another way.