



Catalog No. 1735

Col. 1:28

1st Message

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September 4, 2011

# CREATED FOR A PURPOSE

*SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*

Many people in our culture today would view themselves as a “spiritual” person. No one wants to be viewed as a materialistic, unspiritual heathen. However, people want to pick and choose their personalized variety of spirituality in the same way we go through a buffet line, order a car, or blend a fruit smoothie. Even churchgoers have an incredible choice from the myriad brands and flavors of church, so they can adopt one that fits their style. Spirituality has become associated with an individual, personal choice in a consumer society. People recognize the need for a spiritual life as opposed to merely a physical life, but often the goal and focus of this life are diluted, forgotten, misplaced, or flawed. What is the aim of our spiritual pilgrimage and what is going to help us stay on track as we seek a relationship with God?

Paul’s letter to the Colossians comes to the rescue. This morning I want to make some introductory comments to give you a context for reading this letter, and explain how I am going to approach it. It is very easy to lose sight of the goal of our spiritual life. We need to be reminded, and that is what I hope to do this morning. I want to give you a vision for your spiritual life in Christ that is much bigger than just personal preferences.

## The Church at Colossae

Colossae was a city located in the Lycus Valley in the middle of Asia Minor, close to Ephesus as well as the cities of Laodicea and Hieropolis, 10 and 12 miles away respectively. All three of these cities were located near the Meander River (so named because it meanders through the territory). Hieropolis was known for its healing hot springs and Colossae for its wool industry. Once a large and wealthy city, Colossae had been surpassed in prominence by Laodicea in the first century.

The churches in Colossae, Laodicea and Hieropolis had been birthed while Paul was teaching in Ephesus for a two-year period, described in Acts 19:10 where Luke records that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” Paul did not actually visit Colossae. In fact, there is no record of him ever being there. Rather, it was his disciple Epaphras, himself a native of Colossae, who evangelized this area. He preached the gospel in Colossae and people came to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. (Epaphras is short for Epaphroditus but is not to be confused with the Epaphroditus of Philippians.) Even though there was a large Jewish presence in the Lycus Valley, the church consisted mainly of Gentile believers – pagans brought to Christ through the preaching of the gospel. So not only were these three cities situated in close physical proximity, but the churches in these cities were also closely connected spiritually, as we deduce from Colossians chapter 4 where Paul instructs the church there to exchange this letter he had written to them with the one he had written to the church at Laodicea.

Paul is writing this letter from prison. Tradition holds that Paul was in Rome, but there are reasons to think that Paul was much closer to Colossae, perhaps in Ephesus or Caesarea. Paul has heard from Epaphras that there are real or potential unhealthy influences and unsound practices circulating within the church at Colossae – wrong teachings that would appeal to the human search for wisdom, knowledge, and insight, and promise to deliver a heightened spiritual experience. These influences and practices appear to be a fusion of Judaism and pagan philosophy, and many think an early form of Gnosticism. Paul will talk about what these practices might have been in chapter 2, mentioning specifically the traditions of men, pagan philosophies, ascetic practices, Jewish Torah keeping, and worship of angels.

## The Overriding Objective

Paul writes this letter to challenge these unsound doctrines, but although he is deeply concerned about their influence in the growing church, his primary concern falls under an overriding objective for the church at Colossae, and really every other church he came in contact with. What is the overriding objective of our life in Christ and why does erroneous theological teaching put this objective in jeopardy? This is what we will focus on this morning. Our text is the last two verses of chapter 1.

**“We proclaim him (Christ), admonishing (everyone) and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.” (Colossians 1:28–29 TNIV)**

Let me read it again to you from Eugene Peterson’s translation in *The Message*:

**“We preach Christ, warning people not to add to the Message. We teach in a spirit of profound common sense so that we can bring each person to maturity. To be mature is to be basic. Christ! No more, no less. That’s what I’m working so hard at day after day, year after year, doing my best with the energy God so generously gives me.” (Colossians 1:28–29 THE MESSAGE)**

Paul’s objective, his overriding concern, is for the maturity of believers – to present everyone mature or “complete” in Christ. The ways and means by which Paul sought to accomplish this objective were several:

He preached Christ, the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord.

He admonished and taught, offering both warning and instruction to guide the Colossian believers in their growth.

He used all wisdom, the wisdom of God and the gospel, the mystery of revelation, and not a wisdom or philosophy based on the tradition of men.

He worked hard, extending his very best effort and combining all his efforts and energy with the energy and power that Christ provided.

And we notice that in Paul's mind, maturity was not just for some. Three times Paul uses the little word "all" or "every." He admonished every person, he taught every person so that he could present every person complete or mature in Christ. No one was seen to be unfit or incapable. No one was cast aside. Each person was of primary importance.

Paul's overriding concern was the growth and maturity of believers, and this is to be our concern as well. What does it mean to be mature or "complete" in Christ? It doesn't mean that we will be perfect. It doesn't mean that we will all look the same, like cookie-cutter Christians. It doesn't mean that we will all think the same on secondary issues, to which we may bring many different points of view. It doesn't mean that we won't have struggles or will avoid suffering. It doesn't mean that we will be free from temptation or enjoy intimacy with Jesus 24/7.

The word "mature" can mean perfect or complete. It also has the idea of end, fulfillment, and consummation. To be mature means that we are growing to become what God designed and intended us to be; maturity is the end for which we were created and now the end for which we have been saved and re-created in Christ.

Elsewhere, Paul says that maturity means to become Christ-like, for the life of Christ to be formed in us. He writes to the Galatians, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you..." (Gal. 4.19).

And to the Corinthians he says that we "are being transformed into his (Christ's) image with ever-increasing glory" (2 Cor. 3.17). His desire for the Ephesians was for them to build each other up "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 3.13).

Maturity means to grow into the fullness of Christ, to be whole, to be a holy person, to have a heart that is fully turned towards God, a heart that is being spiritually formed. Maturity speaks of the deep, inner, spiritual transformation of the heart, so remarkable that we are growing to be like Christ in our minds and heart, in our thoughts and in our actions. We don't become perfect – not in this life anyway – but we are making significant progress in that direction. Eventually, one day when Christ comes again, we are going to join in fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And on that day we will be complete, whole, holy, lacking nothing and sharing in the glory of God. That is our destiny, that is where we are headed, and that is our primary goal and objective.

Kallistos Ware writes in *The Orthodox Way*, "The incarnation equally is a doctrine of sharing or participation. Christ shares to the full in what we are, and so he makes it possible for us to share in what he is, in his divine life and glory. He became what we are, so to make us what he is."<sup>1</sup>

Dallas Willard writes in *Renovation of the Heart*, "spiritual formation for the Christian basically refers to the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself ... So then the outer life of the individual becomes a natural expression or outflow of the character and teachings of Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

This is Paul's objective for the Colossian believers. As Gentiles they had been practicing a spirituality that had been defined and created by their pagan culture, and so their inner life had been formed by the world – separate from God. But now, since hearing the gospel, they had been reborn in Christ, and Paul longs for them to be re-formed in the image of Christ, to be completely transformed in their inner lives. This is why Paul is so concerned about erroneous teaching and false spiritual practices, because all of these things that had seemed spiritual and good and had an emotional experience attached to them were not beneficial to the formation of Christ in them. Paul writes this letter to the Colossian believers to make them aware of these things, so they can focus on what will truly form them in Christ.

That's really the reason Paul writes most of the letters in the New Testament. He is not trying to write letters to chastise these new believers for being out of whack or to step into line. No, he's talking to them about a whole new life created in Jesus Christ, and it devastates him to think the transformation that God wants for his people won't happen because they aren't instructed or willing to following the path God has designed for them.

Suppose, for example, that all you ever wanted, from the time you were three years old and received your first pretend doctor's kit, was to grow up and be a doctor. However, when the time came to enroll in medical school, instead you took the LSAT and went to law school. Would going to law school have any benefit to becoming a doctor? Not at all. And that is what Paul wants to tell the Colossians; all these other spiritual practices will not benefit them in reaching their main objective of being formed in Christ.

The idea of becoming like Christ is nothing new for the people of God. This was God's plan for Israel, chosen out of all the nations to be set apart. They were not to be like all the other nations, but rather they were to be holy because God is holy. When you read the book of Leviticus, this is the refrain repeated over and over. It is the same plan for us, now, as the people of God: to become holy. The advantage we have is that the Holy Spirit now lives within us and makes it possible for us to be formed into the image of Christ.

When you think about it, most of us have been on a quest to be something more or better than what we are. We want to improve. We want to become healthy. We want to be a better person. And so we take classes, get degrees, and work hard. We learn about human development, we get counseling, and join various groups. We take lessons in various skills and go to retreats and conferences. We know that we were made for something fantastic. This is a genetic residue from being created in the image of God and finds its fruition in becoming full sons and daughters of our heavenly Father in the likeness of Christ, so much so that we would see Jesus himself as our brother.

So then, an important question for us to consider is, do we really want to be like Christ or do we want to live the way we want to live? In our heart of hearts, do we want to be transformed into Jesus's image or would we rather just have a small dose of God on Sunday and the freedom to live life as we wish the rest of the time? Do we really want to be formed in Christ? If truly what we want is to be formed in Christ, then the second question is, Where is spiritual formation happening in our lives? What activities are nourishing and feeding our souls? What is giving us life? How are we allowing God to work in the deepest part of our hearts? If we are doing religious things but it is draining us of life and we aren't growing, then something is wrong.

Spiritual formation has to be intentional. We have to dedicate time and energy to evaluating and practicing spiritual disciplines that will allow us to continue this pilgrimage toward becoming like Jesus Christ.

Spiritual formation is the purpose for everything we do, or it should be: small groups of various kinds, discipleship, reading Scripture, evangelism, confession, prayer, serving, fellowship and even our times in worship on Sunday mornings. We worship in gratitude for what God has done for us in Christ, but the service is also formative by correcting our thinking and providing a space for us to meet with God.

Don't come to church skeptical or with a critical spirit, wondering if we'll sing the 'right' songs or if the preacher will give a 'good' message. If you come with that attitude you will miss the whole thing, no matter what is taking place. Rather, come with a humble heart and say, "Lord, let me hear from you today. Please speak into my life. What is happening here that will help me be formed in the image of Christ?" If we all come with that attitude, this is going to be a fun church to be around, because we'll all be in it together, worshipping, growing, confessing our sins to one another and growing in Christ together, becoming like him.

### Distracting Influences

Now, the process of transformation isn't easy. As I am beginning to learn, growing old is not for sissies and neither is the spiritual pilgrimage. There will be many influences along the way that will distract you and will be fruitless in maturing you in Christ. The things that Paul mentions in Colossians 2 are many of the same distractions and negative influences we face today.

External religious appearance – adhering to the outer symbols of faith. In the early church this was the temptation to adopt the Jewish identity markers of circumcision, holy days, and food laws. The problem is that external symbols don't touch the heart.

Rigid asceticism – denying the flesh in extreme measures in order to produce humility. The problem with asceticism is that far too often, rather than producing humility it produces just the opposite: pride and arrogance.

Sin management – the thinking that laws or programs will be able to deal with temptation and sin. The problem is that when we focus on not committing sin we usually do it all the more. Managing sin doesn't lead to spiritual formation.

Traditions of men – buying into the idea that "we have always done it this way, this way is the right way and other ways are wrong." This was a Jewish influence in Paul's day but this thinking has many manifestations today.

Emotional spiritual experience – Paul uses the worship of angels as an example. Yes, our relationship with God is and should be deeply emotional, but we can have a tendency to look for some magical, mountaintop experience to fix our hearts. Sometimes God changes us in an instant. But more often our journey is like the growth of a sequoia and not a tomato plant.

Pagan beliefs and worship - the philosophies of the culture seep into our spiritual life. In our day this might be manifested in New Age philosophy.

Paul will touch on all these things in chapter 2, and we could think of many other things that keep us from being transformed, like busyness and worldliness. We will encounter many different

spiritual influences in our life and we can't be passive or uncritical. When we study chapter 2, my desire for us is that we think carefully about the subtle influences that keep us from being changed on the inside. This will require a great deal of honesty.

### The Guiding Focus

So, if there are so many distracting and unproductive influences, what will keep us on track to the goal of our pilgrimage, our maturity in Christ? Paul's answer in the book of Colossians is Christ himself, the realization that in Christ all the fullness of Deity dwells. There is no other place to look for wisdom and knowledge. There is no other place to look for spiritual transformation. There is no other place to look for spiritual experience. The grace of God through Christ is all we need for salvation, and this same grace is all we need for transformation. All the flawed spiritual influences we might encounter dilute, lessen, and cheapen the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.

Therefore, Paul will encourage us to fill our minds with Christ who is the hope of glory, to set our minds on the things above because our life is hidden with Christ in God, to appropriate the new creation by clothing ourselves with the renewed man, to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, and to let the word of Christ richly dwell within us. Christ is all and in all.

The more we focus on Jesus, adore Jesus, and spend time with Jesus, the more we will grow into his likeness. Often we encounter someone that we idolize and want to be like. And so we watch what they do and what they say and we imitate them. Paul tells us to imitate Jesus and pattern our lives after him.

### The Place of Ordinary

Where does transformation happen? We would love to have some dramatic experience or a special weekend conference, but more often than not transformation takes place in the ordinary routines of everyday life over the long haul – living as spouses and parents, going to the grocery store and doing laundry and paying bills.

We grow and mature "by taking the stuff of our ordinary lives, our parents and children, our spouses and friends, our workplaces and fellow workers, our dreams and fantasies, our attachments, our easily accessible gratifications, our depersonalizing of intimate relations, our commodification of living truths into idolatries, taking all this and placing it on the altar of refining fire – our God is a consuming fire – and finding it all stuff redeemed for a life of holiness. A life that is not reserved for nuns and monks but accessible to every Dick and Jane in every ordinary congregation."<sup>3</sup>

As we walk with Jesus faithfully, every day trusting and obeying, God takes the ordinary stuff of our lives and through the work of the Holy Spirit transforms it into extraordinary. He turns the profane into the holy, the cursed into the blessed, the boring into the remarkable. God uses everything, even our sin and our suffering – mostly our suffering. Most of the deep work God has done in my life has been in times of crisis and despair.

And this transforming work takes place not only in our individual life, but also in our church congregation and in our relationships with family and friends. We don't think anything is happening but all of a sudden God opens our eyes to see that he has been creating anew to bring wholeness and health and maturity.

Marriage is a great illustration of our spiritual pilgrimage. The goal of marriage is to become one flesh, and that happens on your

honeymoon, right? Not by a long shot! It is a long, long journey, but as we give ourselves to it faithfully – die to self, learn how to love another person, develop a servant’s heart, let go of all the things we wanted and accept what is – what happens? We wake up one day – 15, 20, 25 years later – and look at our spouse and realize God has been working across the years, making us one flesh. That is what happens in our relationship with God. The important thing is to pay attention, with the realization that the kingdom of God is here in our midst. “Most of us are blessed by experience in which the love of God is made real for us. Our problem is that we are not paying attention, and therefore miss the blessing of discovering the intimate presence of God in our everyday lives.”<sup>4</sup>

This then is the context for the letter to the Colossians. We were created by God but formed by the world. But now we have been re-created through the work of the cross and can be formed into his image through the work of the Holy Spirit. We will encounter many distracting influences, but as we focus on Jesus, God will transform the events of our every day lives into extraordinary holy moments for the glory of God.

*Now may the love of the Father, the grace of the Son and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you this day and forever more. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 43

<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 2002), 22

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, (New York: Harper One, 2011), 230.

<sup>4</sup> James Wilhoit quoting Howard Rice, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 57