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Colossians 2:6-15

11th Message

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# ALIVE AND LIVING IN CHRIST

*SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH*

As we come to our study today in Colossians, I have a strange desire for this room to be filled with people who are not yet Christians, but are searching for God and spiritual life. The reason I say this is two-fold. The first is because this text is great for talking about Christ and what is essential to the Christian faith. Sadly, so many people in the world don't hear about 'simply Jesus' because they are tainted and jaded by what they have seen in the church and in Christians. Second, you all know much of the truth of this text and it is a challenge to hear it with fresh ears.

So, imagine yourselves as the Colossians. A few months ago all of you were pagans for whom the worship of false idols and deities was common. (Actually this may still be a common thing for many of us). And then a man came to town by the name of Epaphras and he shared the gospel, the story about Jesus. And you all believed in this Jesus and committed your life to him as your Lord and Savior – the one who had complete authority in your life. You cleaned out your house of your symbols of other gods and began to live a different life. But lo and behold, some other people started coming around, telling you that Jesus wasn't enough. There were other things you needed to understand and practice in order to gain completeness, fullness, and knowledge of God. You would be confused, wouldn't you? What would you need? You would need a letter from an apostle, a letter just like Colossians.

Our text this morning is chapter 2, verses 6-15. Verses 6-7 provide a pivotal position in the letter and a transition into the heart of the issue. What we see in this text is an exhortation, a warning, and a declaration. We are going to look at them in reverse order, because I want you to have the foundation of Paul's argument clearly in mind.

## The Declaration – Alive in Christ

Verses 9-15 consist of a declaration or confession regarding the person and work of Jesus. We encountered a large section of text in 1:15-20 devoted to the centrality and supremacy of Christ and, although different, here is another large section of text devoted to the same theme, with some of the same stylistic features. Let me do a quick survey to enumerate the essential truths about Jesus and Paul's main point.

**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. (Colossians 2:9-10 ESV)**

We see three ideas. First, all the fullness of deity dwells in Jesus. This is similar to the statement in the Christ hymn in chapter 1: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Colossians 1:19). What was assumed in this verse is now stated plainly. The entire, complete fullness of deity dwells in Christ "in bodily form." The complete, undivided essence of God dwells in the exalted Christ and thus Christ is the exact image of God. Deity

dwells exclusively in Christ and can be found no place else. Christ is not a second, different deity.

Second, believers, like the Colossians, have been filled in him through salvation. Here we see a word play with "fullness" and "filled." In Christ, believers are filled with the one in whom the fullness dwells. There is still a need for continued growth but there is no need to look for fullness in some other spiritual power or ritual observance. If all the fullness did not indwell Jesus then other sources would be viable.

Third, Christ is head over all rule and authority. We learned in chapter 1 that Christ created all rule and authority. He is the source of their being and therefore is superior. Believers do not need to pay their respects to those forces over which Christ rules. We begin to see the main theme here of Christ and Christ alone.

**In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col 2:11-12)**

Basically, those in Christ have been incorporated into the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. This is how the filling happened. The mention of circumcision here is confusing. Normally we think of physical and spiritual circumcision, circumcision of the flesh and the heart and how our heart is circumcised in Christ. We also think of Galatians. In Galatia, Jewish teachers taught that Gentile believers needed to be circumcised in order to be full-fledged members of the people of God, i.e. to be complete. There is no evidence that this was an issue in Colossae although some think it refers to this.

But notice here that "the circumcision of Christ" refers to Christ's death. And although the phrase "putting off the body of the flesh" might refer to the Colossians, it makes sense as applying to Christ and thus it is in parallel with the phrase "the circumcision of Christ." Paul used a very similar phrase in 1:22: "he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death" (Colossians 1:22). Believers are circumcised with the same death, a circumcision performed without hands (i.e. by God). We are then buried with him, baptized or placed into his grave, then raised with Christ through the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Paul is describing a completed process that happened to us. Therefore, a believer is a completely new person in Christ. The old nature no longer has power over us. The old allegiances to false gods no longer have power over us. As resurrected people, believers can live a new life through the power that resurrects.

**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. (Col 2:13-14)**

Now there is a shift in perspective. The pronoun “you” replaces “he.” Paul says that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were spiritually dead, under the power of death, separated from God. Our flesh was alive, active, and uncircumcised, i.e. in a state of permanent disobedience. Physical uncircumcision as Gentiles was a symbol of spiritual uncircumcision. But God did a miracle. He made us alive together with Christ – through a circumcision not made with hands – uniting us with Christ.

How was God able to make us alive? It was an act of pure grace. God forgave (graced) all of our sins through the cross. Notice that Paul now uses the pronoun “us” implying that the cross was necessary for both Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul really elaborates on this act of grace. God had a record, a document of all of our sins. He kept an account of all our debts and like an IOU there were penalty clauses the law demanded. Even though we were Gentiles without Torah we were still accountable to the moral law as much as we understood it. This record of debt stood between God and us. We could do nothing about it, not even file for bankruptcy.

What God did was to remove the debt by nailing it to the cross. “God nails the accusation against us to the cross of Jesus, just as his accusation had been nailed there.”<sup>1</sup> God wiped the slate clean. He rubbed out the debt, as one would erase a blackboard. He picked up the check. He printed out our file, nailed it to the cross, and deleted our record in his computer. We owe him nothing in regard to sin. We owe him everything in regard to our life. Forgiveness is pure grace.

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

Finally, God disarmed, divested, and incapacitated the rulers and authorities of all their power, dignity, and authority, the same two words for rule and authority that Paul used in verse 9. God had a parade, a ticket-tape parade down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue; a triumphal procession in honor of his Son’s victory over the powers of sin and death like the Romans had when they claimed a victory over an enemy. God’s enemies were included in the parade. He put them to open shame. He exposed their utter helplessness for all to see. He made visible their true character. Even though the authorities and powers have not yet been ultimately destroyed, they have been overcome. Christ’s superiority was fully on display.

If you are paying attention you have noticed the thread that weaves through this text – the phrases “in him” and “with him” and “in whom.” The point is that all the fullness of deity dwells in Christ and we have been filled in him by complete immersion, incorporation, and union with his death, burial and resurrection. As a result we are complete in Christ. Paul continues to appeal to the supremacy of Christ as the basis of his arguments.

I grew up going to church every Sunday but I never understood what Paul is talking about here. I became a Christian at the end of college and moved to California. Shortly after arriving here I met Liz, my wife. She was not a Christian at the time. After a couple of weeks of spending time together I knew I had to tell her I was a Christian. As I tried awkwardly to get the words out Liz became nervous. She thought I was going to tell her I was a serial killer

or something. When I finally stammered out the words “I am a Christian” she sighed in relief and said that she was a Christian too. I told her that I didn’t think she was. Being a Christian is not just about believing there is a God and going to church occasionally. It is being united in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Can you remember the first time you began to understand these truths about Jesus? I know this is familiar territory for many of you, but imagine you are the Colossians and all this truth is fresh. It is mind-boggling. We must never let these truths grow stale in our hearts. Every time we read a text like this we should be filled with a sense of awe and wonder. Let me make a suggestion: as we approach Good Friday and Easter, copy out this text on a piece of paper or on a card and put it in a place where you will read it often. We will return to truth of these verses again and again as we proceed through chapters 2 and 3. Now let’s see how Paul uses this argument.

### The Warning – Empty Philosophy

**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. (Col 2:8)**

There was a danger in Colossae. There were some who were telling the Colossians that they were not complete in Christ. In order to have fullness and perfection “they needed to follow a strict discipline of ritual and ascetic observance and to take sufficient account of the spiritual powers.”<sup>2</sup> The text next week will deal with specific issues.

Paul refers to the false teaching as a particular philosophy as opposed to philosophy in general. This philosophy is an empty deception. The false teaching is a hollow sham with no true content, no substance. The source of this teaching is a man-made tradition. A tradition is something that is handed down from one generation to another. Greek philosophies handed down from teacher to student would be an example, as would Jewish oral law. The false teachers were claiming a tradition rooted in antiquity that needed to be preserved. The false teaching was according to the elemental spirits of the world, a reference to basic elements of the physical world – earth, fire, water, and air. The claim was that there were spiritual powers, rulers and authorities, behind these elements and they needed to be recognized and given homage because they controlled man’s destiny.

The arguments of the false teachers were seductive. In 2:3 Paul calls them enticing. Therefore the warning is to beware, to be on guard because one can be carried away as booty or as a captive, carried away into the slavery of error. The false teaching is not according to Christ. The tradition of Christ is what we just talked about. The gospel is the word of truth (1:5). The mystery of Christ is glorious riches (1:27). In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3). In Christ and Christ alone we are complete.

In every generation there are seductive and enticing traditions and philosophies that have power to keep us from being fully in Christ. These philosophies range from legalistic religious life to being involved in a cult. The challenge for us the next two weeks is to think about the voices that influence us, the powers to which

we give honor, the places where we seek a greater spiritual fullness other than Christ.

The warning that Paul gives here is very relevant to new age philosophies, astrology, Indian spirituality or any belief system that ascribes deity to a person or power other than Christ. These teachings are according to human tradition and elemental spirits, but not according to Christ. Anyone who promotes another source of wisdom and knowledge apart from Christ is seeking to take you captive. The fullness of Christ is the antidote to heretical teaching.

But another major application of this letter is in external religious practices. For the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish Christian the temptation was to keep all the ceremonial aspects of the Law to be complete –circumcision, food laws, holy days. What really angered the Pharisees was when Jesus broke the rules, like healing on the Sabbath or eating with sinners. But this attitude continues today.

It is easy for Christians to accumulate a list of do's and don'ts to define their spiritual life. Rules become substitutes for Jesus and people get upset if the rules are broken. We have rules such as not going to movies, not playing cards, not dancing. "We don't dance, drink, smoke or chew and we don't go with girls who do." Rules can become the traditions we follow that define our Christian life and make us a member of the in-group. The enticement is acceptance into the community.

Philosophies like "we are the church that does this" or "we have always done it this way" speak to powers that have control over our lives. While we seek to follow the rules or traditions handed down to us, our heart dies, pride increases, and sin actually abounds because there is no deity, no fullness in rule keeping.

There are other areas of life that we might contemplate as well, places where we seek fullness. These might include our work, our spouse, our children, or our family traditions. All of these things are good, but they are not an added source of spiritual fullness. There is no deity in them. If we seek some sort of completeness from these areas of life then we will become captives.

All traditions are not bad. There are traditions that are handed down through the generations that give life and cultivate faith and there are behaviors that are not wise, things that we should avoid. But we have to be aware, guarding against substituting rules or people for our being in Christ. Whenever the truth of Jesus breaks through the dead orthodoxy of the church there has been revival. And revival happens because people start living in Christ. That is the exhortation.

### The Exhortation – Live in Christ

**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. (Col 2:6-7)**

Bernard Bell gave an entire message on these verses in January 2011. You might want to reread that message. The idea of "receive" here does not refer to praying the prayer and "receiving Christ" but rather to receiving a tradition. Again, the idea is a teaching that has been handed down. The Colossians received the tradition of Christ through Epaphras. The tradition centers on Jesus as Lord, the person of Jesus, the first-born of creation and the new creation,

the one who died on a cross for forgiveness of sins. Jesus is not one among many but rather the only one in whom deity resides.

The exhortation here is to walk in Christ or live in Christ, to keep the tradition received and not be seduced by other traditions. For Paul there is no distinction between believing and living. Walking involves every aspect of our lives, how we live in a way that is true to our identity in union with Christ and pleasing to God. This is the very thing that Paul prayed in 1:10:

asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (Colossians 1:9–10).

Note once again the phrase "in him" that occurs twice in verses 6-7.

Paul says that the Colossians have been rooted like a tree, planted in the rich soil of Christ through death, burial, and resurrection. This has happened in the past and has ongoing effects. The Colossians are currently in the process of being built up like a building or dwelling. Paul uses the metaphors of horticulture and architecture elsewhere in his letters. They are currently in the process of being established or strengthened. And they are overflowing with gratitude. The idea of thanksgiving occurs seven times in Colossians (1:3, 1:12, 2:7, 3:15, 3:16, 3:17, 4:2). When we live in Christ, we overflow with a joyful gratitude. No doubt this is based on what God has done for us in Christ. When we are captured by the truths of verses 9-15 we cannot help but overflow with thanksgiving.

But what does it mean for us to live or walk in Christ? This is the question that will occupy us for the next several weeks as we move into chapter 3 of Colossians. Essential to living in Christ is the fact that you have been fully and completely incorporated into the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. At some point God put you and Jesus together. This is the mind-set that is foundational for how we live. Maybe you can understand now why I went in reverse order. Having a clear understanding of the tradition of Christ is essential to fend off empty philosophies and live in Christ without being ruled by external religious practices. We are to live fully in Christ.

We don't start living based on a bunch of rules. We don't select a church because that church does all the things we like in terms of religious practices. If we start living by external guidelines, even things that are good ideas, we will end up living in our own strength and power. We will be under the control of powers that have no deity, imprisoned by all the do's and don'ts. Rather, we start living as people who have been filled in Christ.

I have been trying to come up with pictures that illustrate what Paul is talking about. Let me try this: My wife has a horse. Every time she goes to the barn she comes home and tells me what happened with Blue. Some days she comes home and tells me that Blue was such a good boy, meaning, that they were in sync, in harmony. She gave Blue a voice command or nudged him gently and he did everything she wanted. But there are other days when she comes home lamenting and saying that Blue was being rebellious, acting out like a teenager. Now we are not trained animals, but we are joined to another and living in Jesus means walking in harmony, in sync with Jesus. At the end of the day we might take time to reflect: When were we walking in harmony with God, listening and being

attentive to his presence? When were we being rebellious, ignoring his voice and doing what we wanted?

Let me try another analogy. How about Buzz Lightyear? Buzz imagines himself to be real and not a toy. He thinks he has the power to fly and special equipment to adapt to outer space. His motto is “to infinity and beyond.” What if we saw ourselves not just as a person, but a person in Christ, who we are in reality? What if we saw ourselves to have powers, not powers from intellect, status, abilities or some vague cosmic source, but powers from the Holy Spirit who indwells. Our motto might be “faith in Jesus and beyond.”

When we are filled in him the life of Jesus flows from within, spilling out wherever we go. When we go to work, we are not “in Apple,” living in the culture of Apple; we are in Christ. When we go shopping, we are not “in Macy’s,” coveting possessions; we are in Christ. When we come to church, we are not “in PBCC,” trying to act like we belong; we are in Christ. When we are in Christ we are not trying in our own strength to act like Christ but rather being Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are alive in Christ and now we are living in Christ. And if we are living in Christ then our heart is overflowing with gratitude and joy for what God has done for us in Christ.

*Blessed be our Father who has filled us with his Son, so that we might live in Him.*

1. Peter O’Brien, *WBC: Colossians and Philemon*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 126.
2. O’Brien, 121.

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