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Colossians 1:24-2:5

9th Message

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# A PURPOSE-FILLED SERVANT

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH

Where are we going in our Christian life? Where are we headed? What are we becoming? This is the topic we want to pick up today in our study of Colossians. Like last week our text is Colossians 1:24 through 2:5, an autobiographical section by Paul that is characterized by the subjects "I" and "we." This is the second of three weeks in this text as we take a separate theme each week. Last week the theme was Paul's mission and message. The theme this morning is Paul's objective, his goal for the saints in Colossae and thus for all followers of Jesus. We begin in verse 24:

**Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which 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, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. (Col. 1:24-29, ESV)**

## Growing into Maturity

What is the goal of our Christian life? Clearly, Paul's goal is to "present everyone mature in Christ." Literally, Paul says to "present every man (and woman) complete or perfect in Christ." You might remember that we began our studies in Colossians by talking about verses 28-29. All of Colossians falls under this theme. Here we are again.

What is Paul talking about? When we become a believer we become a new creation in Christ, but we are not perfect yet. We begin a process of growing more and more to become like Christ. The inner person begins to change and becomes like the inner being of Christ, growing in character and beauty. The transformed inner life then manifests itself in external actions that are Christ-like.

I remember shortly after my conversion stopping for gasoline one day. When paying my bill, the attendant gave me too much change. I quickly noted the error and returned the amount that was not mine. Instantly, I wondered what had happened. I was a different person. The old John would never have done that.

We will not become perfect in this life, but we are intended to make significant progress. In the age to come, when Christ comes again, then we will be perfect and will share in the glory of God. There is a beginning and there is an end and we are on a journey or pilgrimage between these two points.

There are two metaphors in Scripture that give us a picture of this journey. One is found in Galatians 4:19 and draws on women's experience of giving birth. Paul describes his determined effort on

behalf of the Church, being "again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). Paul's ministry with the Galatian church was like the anguish of a mother suffering labor pains. He wants to give birth to fully formed believers.

We find the other metaphor in 2 Cor. 3:18: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18). The word "transformed" means to change from one form into another. We get our word "metamorphosis" from this word, the word used to describe the process of a caterpillar being transformed into a butterfly.

The same word is used in Romans 12: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). And in Romans 8, he speaks of the same process: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Romans 8:29).

We are created in the image of God, but we come into this world in a fallen state. We are formed away from God through the many experiences we have and choices we make. We are ruled by desires that lead us away from God. Transformation is necessary to become what we were always intended to be and to give us the desire to move towards God. Transformation is the process of Christ being incarnated within us. Christ took on the form of a human and became like us so that we could become like him.

For Paul the goal is not just conversion or joining a church. This idea would never have entered Paul's mind. Conversion is the beginning. The goal is transformed disciples of Jesus. There is a big difference between, on the one hand, becoming a believer and going to church but enjoying this life as much as we can, knowing that one day we will go to heaven, and on the other hand becoming the person we will be for all eternity. Paul would probably have a problem with today's mega-church obsession. His desire was for large numbers to respond to the gospel but his concern was the quality of character in those who came to believe, how believers lived and projected themselves in community. Paul was both an evangelist and a pastor.

The church uses several different words to describe this process of becoming like Christ: discipleship, sanctification, mentoring, growing into maturity. In recent years there has been a growing interest in spiritual formation, a word that has not been as commonly used in the evangelical church but that speaks to the same process. Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and many others have written on this topic of spiritual formation in recent years.

Ruth Haley Barton writes that transformation "...is an organic process that goes far beyond mere behavioral tweaks to work deep, fundamental changes at the very core of our being. In the process of transformation the Spirit of God moves us from behaviors

motivated by fear and self-protection to trust and abandonment to God; from selfishness and self-absorption to freely offering the gifts of the authentic self; from the ego's desperate attempts to control the outcomes of our lives to an ability to give ourselves over to the will of God which is often the foolishness of the world. This kind of change is not something we can produce or manufacture for ourselves but it is what we most need. It is what those around us most need."<sup>1</sup>

The question that we have to ask is, "Do we just want a ticket to heaven and live this life the way we want to or do we want to be totally and radically changed from the inside out?"

A couple of weeks ago I got a call from a friend who had just listened to my first message in this series on these very verses. He told me that he was coming home. I asked him what he meant. He told me that the past couple of years he was living the Christian life on the outside but that his heart was far away from God, caught up instead in his business pursuits and worrying about profit. Paul's word to the Colossians stopped him cold and he told his wife that he really wanted to be formed in Christ. He was going to come home.

Unfortunately this story is all too common in American Christianity. By way of example, Willow Creek Community Church is a large, well-known church in Illinois. A few years ago they did a study called *Reveal* to "... determine whether their programs were actually producing life change. Their conclusion from the reports of their own people is that participation in church programming does not effect significant life change beyond conversion.... Bill Hybels, the megachurch's flagship pastor, tells of his pain in hearing from his top leaders that the research they had done on three decades of Willow Creek activities revealed to them that Willow Creek had not done as well as they had thought in making fully devoted followers of Jesus. He shared that 'when I heard these results, the pain of knowing was almost unbearable. Upon reflection, I realized that the pain of not knowing could be catastrophic.'"<sup>2</sup>

One of the reasons why so much is being written today on spiritual formation is the recognition that people within our churches are not being transformed.

## Ways and Means of Transformation

Paul qualifies the goal of formation with several ideas. First Paul's method for achieving his goal is primarily proclaiming or preaching the person and truth of Jesus, further amplified by warning and teaching in all wisdom. The word "warning" or "admonish" has "to do with setting the mind of someone in proper order, correcting him or putting him right."<sup>3</sup> The implication is that something is out of joint. The idea of teaching involves straightening out confusions, tying up loose ends, filling out half-grasped ideas. This is why PBCC has always had a large emphasis on expository teaching and discipleship focused on the Word of God.

But we have to be careful here. Paul is not talking about just gaining Bible knowledge. Bible knowledge in itself does not lead to transformation. Growing into maturity is a matter of taking the Word deep into our hearts and personally encountering all the wisdom of God. The word of God is similar to food. Food is essential for our physical growth and nourishment but it has to be taken into our mouth, chewed, swallowed, and digested to be effective. The same thing is true with the Word of God. We must take the word of God and the wisdom of Jesus deep within our hearts so that it will have its effect. As James says, we must receive the word implanted so that we become doers of the word and not hearers only. This is why

small groups are so important. They provide a means for interacting over Scripture and a safe place to talk about the application in our own life.

Second, growing into maturity is the goal for every believer, not just the spiritual elite. This alludes to a danger facing the church in Colossae, a special and higher spiritual status. Three times in these verses Paul uses the word "everyone." We don't need to know Greek or Hebrew or go to seminary. We are not excluded because of the depth of our sin, the difficulties of handicaps, or the trials of childhood. Formation into Christ is for everyone in Christ. There is no option for just going to church and being a good person. Becoming a disciple of Jesus and following him is the only option in the Christian life.

Third, we note the effort Paul expends to help people grow. He toils and struggles. The word "struggle," is the word from which we get "agonize." It was a word used of an athletic contest. And yet Paul knows that the energy comes from God. It is God working through him. This highlights an important principle in formation. Growing into mature people of Christ requires effort, work, and discipline. However, our efforts don't cause transformation because that can only come from God through the power of the Holy Spirit. What we see in Paul is that we are not passive in the process of transformation. Dallas Willard in his book, *Renovation of the Heart*, uses the acronym V.I.M. for our involvement in the process. "V" stands for vision of a changed life. "I" stand for the intention to achieve it. "M" stands for the means or practices that will allow God to transform us.

Finally, I would add one more qualification. Growing into mature men and women is a life-long process. The journey is a marathon, not a sprint. There are no quick fixes. We will never reach perfection in this life. We don't graduate until we die. And so we keep moving towards the greater goal. Our journey will take us through many different seasons in life – good times and bad, suffering and celebration, endings and beginnings. And God uses each of these seasons for his purposes to complete in us what he has started.

We are a community of disciples, followers of Jesus. The goal is for each individual and for us corporately to grow in maturity and be formed in Christ. When we get to chapter 3 we will talk more about what this looks like, but for now we can conclude that everything we do – Sunday church, Bible study, quiet times, fellowship, prayer, small groups, missions, marriage, coffee with a Christian friend – should be viewed under the overriding goal of being formed in Christ and helping others on the same journey. We don't have to always be super-serious but we do need to be intentional.

## The Concern – Deception and Distractions

Why is Paul bringing up this matter for Colossians? Well, he is writing a letter to encourage the believers in Colossae and in the Lycus Valley because there is a threat that might disrupt the process of spiritual growth in their lives and community. Let's read verses 1-5 of chapter 2.

**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, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit,**

**rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.**

These five verses are bracketed with the idea of never seeing Paul physically and not being in Colossae physically. However, he is with them in spirit. This is possible because he is in Christ and they are in Christ, therefore Paul can be present with them since both live with Christ.

For the first time in this letter Paul mentions a dangerous influence that might throw the Colossian believers off track. The danger comes from false teaching, some sort of ascetic mysticism with Jewish roots involving rigid disciplines, worship of angels, and keeping aspects of Jewish law. Some believe that the false teaching is strictly from Jewish sources. Others believe it was a form of Gnosticism. Whatever the source, it seems to be a mixture of Judaism and paganism.

Paul's letter indicates that this teaching is not currently having an impact in Colossae. He rejoices that the church was in good order, that there was a well-ordered lifestyle in the community, and that their faith in Christ was firm and steadfast. Both of these words are used in a military context and might imply that the church is like a troop of soldiers holding down a position, ready to resist an enemy. However, this false teaching might deceive or delude these believers because it is persuasive and plausible.

In every generation there are deceptive and persuasive teachings that are false, that detract from growing fully in Christ. I am always amazed how people get attracted to some cult activity or fall under the power of a controlling leader. I remember a young man in a bible study years ago that was heavily influenced by the Moonies. It was hard for me to understand. But these threats are real.

There are threats to spiritual growth on many levels. There is the danger of becoming passive and unintentional about our spiritual life. There is a danger of doing "Christian" activities but not involving our heart. We can lose heart or give up on God because of difficult circumstances in our life. Without even recognizing it we can perform to simply find acceptance from our Christian community. As we continue through chapter 2 in the coming weeks and discuss the Colossian heresy, I hope we can flesh out the subtle influences and practices that might be impeding our spiritual growth.

### **The Encouragement – Christ is the Source of Growth**

So how can we stay on track, focused on the greater goal of spiritual maturity? Paul gives us the answer in verses 1-3. Basically, he encourages the Colossians and us in the truth that Jesus is the source of everything that we need to be formed in him. Christ and Christ alone is necessary for spiritual birth. Christ and Christ alone is necessary for spiritual growth. Let's sort out the particulars.

The saints at Colossae, Laodicea, and elsewhere in the Lycus Valley have been knit together in love. This means that either love binds them together (this is how he uses the word in Eph. 4:16 and later in chapter 2) or that they have been instructed in love as a foundation of the Christian life. Even though Paul has never met the saints in the Lycus Valley he wants to encourage them. More likely the idea is stronger. Paul wants their hearts to be strengthened so that some heretical teaching will not carry them away. The heart, as always, refers to the "inner life of the person ... the source of will, emotion, thoughts, and affections."<sup>4</sup>

The source of strength is a deep understanding and knowledge of the divine mystery, the content of which is Christ. Even though it

is hard to see this in the English translation, we see it in two parallel phrases introduced with the same preposition:

**for all the riches of full assurance of understanding and for the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ**

Christ is the object of both understanding and knowledge. The first phrase speaks to having a deep and full certainty in the understanding of God's mystery in Christ. The second phrase speaks of having a personal knowledge of Jesus. A strengthened heart results in a deep, abiding conviction centered in Christ that is necessary in the face of false and deceptive teaching, in order to stay grounded and focused on the long-term goal.

Paul then goes on to say that in Christ is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The word "hidden" does not imply the goal to conceal. It means that the treasure is deposited or stored up in Christ.

The words that Paul uses here – wisdom, knowledge, and understanding – are significant. We remember that Paul also used the term "wisdom" when he talked about teaching. The heretics were offering understanding and knowledge of God that was separate from Christ. They were offering a special wisdom separate from Christ. Any counterfeit spirituality diminishes the centrality and supremacy of Christ in some way. Paul is reminding the Colossians that they have everything they want or need in Christ. "To search for other sources of knowledge apart from him is a useless enterprise."<sup>5</sup>

Paul used these same words when he prayed in chapter 1: "And so, from the day we heard, 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 says that the key to transformation is to go deeper and deeper into Christ, to plumb the depths of Christ, and to partake of the rich treasures in Christ. Christ is the wisdom and knowledge of God.

Here is an analogy. Suppose you had two bank accounts. In one account was one billion dollars while the other account had a paltry ten bucks. Which account would you draw on? Of course you would draw on the rich account. Drawing on the small account is like going to any place other than Jesus for spiritual maturity. In Jesus we have an inexhaustible treasure of everything we need to be transformed into his likeness.

This is why Paul in this letter talks so much about the supremacy of Christ. Thus far we have seen that in Him we are redeemed (1:14), in him all things were created (1:19), in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (1:19), in his body of flesh we were reconciled (1:22), and now we see that in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3).

Where are we going and what are we becoming? Perhaps you are filled with doubts and confusion in your relationship with God. Perhaps you're looking for some spiritual clue that will make your life fall into place. Perhaps you have a longing and you wonder if there is something else you need. Paul is present with us in spirit through his letter to encourage and strengthen our hearts, reminding us that everything we need – wisdom, knowledge, understanding— is hidden in Jesus. If we want transformation then come to Jesus, sit with Jesus, listen to Jesus. Jesus is always near.

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.<sup>6</sup>

1 Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*, (IVP, Downers Grove, IL., 2008), 16.

2 Keith Meyer, *The Kingdom Life*, (NavPress, Colorado Springs, 2010), 147.

3 Peter O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 88.

4 O'Brien, 93.

5 O'Brien, 95

6 Adapted from St. Patrick's Breastplate Prayer

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