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Colossians 2:6-7

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## OVERFLOWING LIFE

It's a new year: we have left 2010 behind us and embarked on 2011. Some of you stayed up late on Friday night to celebrate the transition. Some of you have taken time to ponder this transition a little more seriously. Perhaps you have made new year's resolutions: this year you are going to be different! Perhaps you've been making the same resolutions year after year, wanting to live a better life but never able to keep it going for very long.

As we have done for the past two years I want to use today's message to set before you a vision of some aspect of the Christian life as we move into a new year. Two years ago I looked at what it means to be a church. Last year my topic was the role of the Spirit in transforming us as people. This year I want to continue that theme. We make new year's resolutions because we want to be better people. God also wants to make us better people. The turning of the calendar is an appropriate time to ask two big questions: who are we? And how should we live?

My text today is very brief, just two verses:

**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 ESV)**

This is a great text to commit to memory.

Verse 6 consists of two halves: a premise in the past and a consequence in the present. The premise in the past: "as you received Christ Jesus the Lord," leads to the consequence in the present: "so walk in him." Paul's command to the Colossian Christians to walk in Christ is predicated on the fact that they have already received Christ. What does it mean to receive Christ? It's a term used frequently in Christian circles. We urge people to pray the prayer and invite Jesus into their hearts, thus receiving him. For most people, "receiving Christ" is another way of saying that one has become a Christian. But for Paul, and for others in New Testament times, receiving Christ had a richer meaning.

Paul was very familiar with the idea of receiving something. The thing received was the tradition. That's what tradition is: something that is literally "handed down." Tradition is an inter-generational transaction. It is received from the previous generation and passed on to the next generation. Every generation therefore has two responsibilities with respect to tradition: to faithfully receive it from the previous generation and to faithfully pass it on to the next generation. Thereby the tradition is kept alive. Yet this is not how tradition is usually viewed. To most people tradition implies death not life. Tradition is often a negative term. Practices are dismissed as mere tradition. Tradition often produces conflict between the generations. The younger generation chafes against the tradition of their elders. The older generation, which itself had once been the younger generation, laments that the youngsters have no respect for tradition. Yet tradition is essential to healthy life. We walk in the footsteps of the generations that have gone before us. In each generation there

are things that are best left behind, just as for many of us there are things best left behind as we move from 2010 to 2011. The practice of making new year's resolutions attests to this desire for a fresh start. But each generation stands on the shoulders of its predecessors.

Many of you are familiar with the opening song of *Fiddler on the Roof*: "Tradition." The whole show is about tradition: how far can the younger generation depart from the tradition before things break? Here's what Tevye says either side of this first song which sets up not just the song but the whole show:

How do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: Tradition! Because of our traditions we've kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything: how to sleep, how to eat, how to work, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I'll tell you: I don't know. But it's a tradition. And because of our traditions everyone of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do...Traditions, traditions. Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.

This is language that Paul would have understood. Before he encountered Christ, or rather, Christ encountered him, Paul was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were steeped in tradition and Paul was steeped in Pharisaism. As a young man he had journeyed all the way from Tarsus to Jerusalem to be a disciple of Gamaliel, one of the two leading rabbis of his day. Here, at the feet of the best of the previous generation, he faithfully received the tradition. This required years of hanging on every word uttered by his master, until his thinking was indistinguishable from that of Gamaliel, until he had fully absorbed Gamaliel's understanding of life and had come to live life the same way.

This tradition that he received from Gamaliel covered every aspect of life. We get glimpses of it in the gospels where it is called "the tradition of the elders." Nothing in life was too insignificant to be covered by this tradition. But unlike Tevye, the Pharisees knew where their tradition came from, or so they claimed. At Mount Sinai Moses had written down the commandments which God had given him for his people Israel. This was the Torah, the written law which was to govern Israel's behavior. But the Pharisees believed that there was also another set of commandments which had not been written down. Instead, they were passed on orally from generation to generation. This was the oral law, what the gospels call the tradition of the elders. It was finally written down, but not until several generations after Paul; in the second century A.D. it was written down as the Mishnah.

This tradition was very important to the Pharisees for exactly the same reasons as for Tevye: it enabled each of them to know who he was and what God expected him to do. These are the two big questions of life: who am I? And how should I live? Paul and his fellow Pharisees had answers to both. One question was addressed by salva-

tion, the other by sanctification. Who was Paul the Pharisee? He was a son of Abraham. His physical descent from Abraham, sealed by his circumcision, gave him membership in God's family. How was Paul the Pharisee to live life? By keeping the law, both written and oral, thereby living a sanctified life pleasing to God. Keeping the law didn't save him; it didn't address the question, "Who am I?" That was already settled through physical descent from Abraham. Keeping the law was the right way for a son of Abraham to live; it was the way of sanctification.

The word which the Pharisees used for this tradition, this oral law, was *halakah*, meaning "walking." Walking is a familiar Biblical metaphor for conduct or behavior. In our recent studies in Genesis, we've seen that both Lamech and Noah walked with God (Gen 5:22,24; 6:9). Later God called Abraham to walk before him (Gen 17:1). The metaphor is carried over into the New Testament. As a Pharisee Paul had received the tradition that was handed down to him. He then lived his life in accordance with that tradition, walking in the *halakah*, following all its rules and regulations. This *halakah*, this oral tradition, gave the Pharisees their rule book for daily living.

Paul the Pharisee might seem very distant to us today. But the two big questions remain the same. Who am I? And how should I live? In one way or another all people are shaped by a tradition received from previous generations. Such tradition shapes our world view, our self-understanding, and our conduct. Such tradition shapes our metanarrative, our understanding of the big picture of our lives.

The Pharisaic tradition was one of rules. Many Christians have received a similar tradition, thinking that the Christian life, the Christian walk, is all about doing the right things. They are afraid that God is ready to whack them if they step out of line. In this case tradition conveys death not life. The church historian Jaroslav Pelikan famously said, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."<sup>1</sup> The three major branches of the church have three very different understandings of tradition. For the Orthodox church Tradition is the set of beliefs and practices established by the church in the fourth through eighth centuries. For the Catholic church Tradition is an evolving set of beliefs and practices formally approved by the church hierarchy. The Protestant church has tended to dismiss Tradition but has been very effective in developing traditions and passing them on. In any of the three what is passed on can be either tradition, the living faith of the dead, or mere traditionalism, the dead faith of the living.

Tevye was well on the way in the transition from tradition to traditionalism: "You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I'll tell you: I don't know. But it's a tradition." Those words could be said in many churches today.

Rule-keeping is a tradition to which Christians are particularly prone. Protestant churches have been especially effective at reducing Christian teaching and life to sets of rules. There are two other common traditions that people receive, in which they are nurtured: the tradition of victimhood and the tradition of entitlement.

Many people view themselves as victims, both on the individual level and on the corporate level. Unable to let go of the past, they remain prisoners of it. Tradition keeps alive the stories of injustice, of real or perceived slights. As long as these stories form the governing metanarrative of life, people are unable to escape into freedom. Many actually find comfort and self-worth in this self-characterization as victim. A few weeks ago, in reading an obituary of Richard Holbrooke, I came across an arresting statement made by him, de-

scribing people as "infatuated with the mythology of their victimhood." This was Holbrooke's view of the Serbs as he was trying to negotiate the Dayton peace accord between the Serbs and the Bosnians in 1995. This Serbian sense of victimhood goes back many, many centuries. It is passed on to each generation in the stories they tell, in their understanding of their history and identity. "Infatuated with the mythology of their victimhood" describes many individuals and many people groups. Victimhood describes their self-understanding, and victimhood governs their daily behavior. Sadly I know people who live their lives this way and take comfort in living their lives this way.

Entitlement is an equally harmful metanarrative. Unfortunately it is one enshrined in the Constitution. The Declaration of Independence holds it as self-evident that all have the unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. On this is built the American Dream. This message has crossed over into the church, where the American Dream is often indistinguishable from the lives of many Christians. We expect that God owes us certain things, that we are entitled to "health, wealth and prosperity," or a "wonderful plan for our lives," or a life free from pain and suffering. Again, this understanding of entitlement affects daily behavior.

But there is another way in which a sense of entitlement affects Christian behavior. Many Christians think that they are free to pursue their own lifestyles, only now under the blessing of God's approval. Since God is a God of love, surely he accepts everyone as they are, giving them his loving approval to be their authentic selves. Today this is probably most evident in the area of sexuality, but it affects many other areas of life. Indeed, many of the character traits praised in Christian leaders today would have been viewed with great suspicion in the past.

So, what is the tradition which you have received? Are there any elements of rule-keeping, of victimhood, of entitlement? Who are you? What is your self-understanding? What is your metanarrative? What big picture do you see yourself as part of? And how should you live? How does your metanarrative govern your daily behavior? How does it affect the choices you make, both big and small? These are the questions I set before you at the beginning of this new year.

Paul had clear answers to these questions. He had faithfully received the tradition, and he was living it, walking according to the rules of *halakah*. But then one day he encountered Christ Jesus on the Damascus Road. His life was turned upside down. Rather, his life was turned the right way up because he came to see that he had the wrong metanarrative, the wrong tradition. He received a new tradition, direct from the Lord. A tradition centered on the Lord Jesus Christ. Elsewhere he tells us how this turned his values upside down:

**I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...that I may know him...becoming like him. (Phil 3:4-10)**

Nurtured in the tradition of the Pharisees, Paul had great grounds for self-confidence. He was one of the best of the best. He knew who he was and he was proud of it. He knew how to behave and he was proud of that too. But now he looked back on all that as rubbish. He had attained something far more precious. He had found far more satisfying answers to the two big questions. He had learned that he was part of a different story. It's not a story that was in discontinuity with his previous story, but one in a more profound continuity. As he would tell the Colossians just a few verses later, the rules and regulations of the law were a shadow of the things to come, but the reality had arrived in Christ (2:17). Christ was the fulfillment of the law. Christ was the one towards whom the faith of Abraham pointed.

Whom did Paul now understand himself to be? He saw that the Pharisees had the wrong answer to this first question. Their self-understanding was that they were saved by their physical descent from Abraham, sealed by their circumcision. But Paul now saw that it was not the physical genes of Abraham that mattered but the faith of Abraham. Indeed, Jesus had said the same thing to the Pharisees. They were in just as much need of salvation as anyone else. Though Paul was a physical descendant of Abraham he was in just as much need of salvation as were the Gentiles who were not descendants of Abraham. But God had saved him. By grace and through faith God had placed him into Christ, had declared that in Christ he was now part of his family. And this changed everything. At the center was now Christ, both at the center of history and at the center of his own life.

How did Paul now understand that he was to behave? Here, too, he saw that the Pharisees had the wrong answer to this second question. Their conduct was based on keeping the rules, the traditions of the elders. But Paul saw that the law conveyed death and condemnation. The law was unable to give him the ability to keep the law. The law was a high standard, but Paul saw that he was called to an even higher standard, to walk not in *halakah*, but in Christ with the goal of becoming like him. But God had also given him the enabling power to actually do so, by putting his Spirit in him. Jesus Christ has set a new pattern for life. He is the new human. And so Paul contrasts the first Adam with the second Adam, living in the flesh with living in the Spirit, living under the law with living under grace.

Paul realized that once someone was in Christ everything was changed. Who was he? Someone who was now in Christ! How was he to live? In Christ in such a way as to become like Christ!

Paul had received a new tradition: he had received Christ. And he devoted himself to passing this on to the next generation. For example, to the Corinthians he said, "I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you" (1 Cor 11:23). But many of Paul's letters are shaped around this idea. In the first part he lays out what God has done in Christ and how he has placed his people into Christ. That's the metanarrative, the big picture. Then, with a "therefore," he transitions into instructions for living, how to live in Christ.

This is what Paul is doing here in Colossians. Our verses begin with "therefore." In chapter 1 Paul has laid out the supremacy of Christ, showing that this Jesus Christ is the Lord. He has given thanks for the participation of the Colossian Christians in God's kingdom over which God has appointed Christ as Lord. These Colossians have received Christ, they are participants in the great story of what God is doing through Christ and his Spirit. Therefore, they should walk in Christ, living their lives as participants in him.

Paul devotes much of the rest of the letter to describing what walking in Christ looks like. It's not a list of rules. Rather, it's a description of character. That's what the Christian life is all about: living as transformed people. Living as people who are becoming truly human. Living the way that God intends humans to live. What does this look like? We are to be filled with faith, hope and love. We are to show the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In our immediate context, Paul qualifies this walk in Christ with four participles:

**rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (2:7)**

Paul mixes his metaphors. We are rooted in Christ; he is the soil in which we as the plant are growing. From him we draw our nourishment. In him we find our stability, our anchor. The planting happened in the past, when God placed us in Christ, but it has ongoing effects in the present as our roots go deeper and deeper into Christ.

We are being built up in Christ. There is ongoing growth. This is true both for the individual believer and for the corporate church. The goal is that we be fully formed, fully built up into a suitable dwelling place for God. But that doesn't happen immediately; it's an ongoing process.

We are established in the faith. The verb here concerns the confirmation of documents. As we are taught the faith, we find it more and more to be true, we accept it as confirmed, as the true reality. The faith that we are taught is the tradition about Christ, the story of what God has done in and through Christ Jesus the Lord.

Finally Paul switches to an active participle: we are abounding in thanksgiving, overflowing in gratitude. Paul is rather fond of this word "overflowing" in describing the Christian life. In several different letters he writes that Christians are to be overflowing people: overflowing in hope, in love, in joy, in comfort or encouragement, in thanksgiving or gratitude. When we walk in Christ, empowered by the Spirit to live new lives as true humans, we will be so filled with life that it overflows. Perhaps you know some people who can be described as overflowing. Sadly many Christians do not overflow with life. But the early Christians did overflow with life, even when they were facing death. Their Roman neighbors saw and noticed. And these neighbors inquired: how is it possible to have such an overflowing life even in the face of death? An overflowing life is one of the best forms of evangelism.

But rule-keeping, victimhood, and entitlement don't produce lives of overflowing virtue. Lives may overflow, but what they overflow with is undesirable. Rule-keepers easily overflow with pride and conceit. They are puffed up, just as the praying Pharisee whom Jesus described in his parable. We can sense from the Philippians passage that Paul probably had felt this way. He had plenty of reason for confidence in the flesh. Victims overflow with anger, resentment and bitterness. People with a sense of entitlement overflow: it might be with the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations, or with the satisfaction of the realization of their expectations, or with the arrogant determination to pursue their own lifestyle choices, claiming entitlement to God's approval since he's a God of love.

Only a life centered on Christ can truly produce a life overflowing in gratitude, in hope, in love, in joy, in comfort and encouragement.

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition: The 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 65.

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Is your life overflowing? If so, what is it overflowing with? With bitterness, resentment and anger because you feel a victim? With grief or self-pity? With pride or self-confidence because of your accomplishments and rule-keeping? Or is it overflowing with life, with love, joy, hope, encouragement, and gratitude.

Our desire for you this year is that you be formed into the likeness of Christ so that your life overflows. As you have received Christ, so walk in him...overflowing in gratitude.