

Sermons on Colossians-Brian Bill

- Colossians 1:1-18 Taking Time to Give Thanks
- Colossians 1:15-23 The Supreme Question Of Life
- Colossians 1:24-2:5 Discovering Your Purpose
- Colossians 2:6-15 Deepening Your Roots
- Colossians 2:16-23 Pulling the Weeds of Legalism
- Colossians 3:1-11 Breaking Free From the Past
- Colossians 3:18 -4:1 Making Your Relationships Work
- Colossians 4:2-6 Knowing What to Pray For
- Colossians 4:7-6 Why We Need Each Other

Colossians 1:1-8 Taking Time To Give Thanks Series

Summary: When we think of God's work in the lives of other believers, we should be moved to thankfulness for the faith, hope, and love that we see demonstrated in Christ followers.

Taking Time to Give Thanks

Several weeks ago, when we were organizing our file cabinet, I came across some love letters from Beth that I've kept ever since we were dating. When I found this folder, I immediately stopped working, sat down in the middle of the floor, and started browsing through them.

My favorite letter is dated June 30, 1983 and was sent to me when I was teaching at the Evangelical Bible College in Zimbabwe, Africa on a summer mission trip. Beth and I had met and become good friends the previous semester when we were at Moody Bible Institute together, and even though I wanted to date her, she had not yet seen the light! Things didn't look very good because she was going out with some "dweeb" from another college. On top of that, she was planning to transfer to Nursing School in the fall and there was a chance I would never see her again.

Anyway, during the spring I found out that she had broken up with her boyfriend (actually, I pestered her roommate almost every day until she spilled the beans!). I had been praying for this relationship to tube out and was thrilled when it dissolved. But instead of immediately calling her for a date, I decided to wait until she told me this news herself. I thought that if she told me about the breakup, it would be a signal that she might be interested in me. I found out in March. April came and went. May went by quickly and then I left for Africa in June.

We both said we would write during the summer but I seriously doubted if I would ever hear from her again. She wrote several times and then I received a four-page epistle that changed everything. Let me read her closing lines: "Brian, one thing I may not have told you during spring semester but Rod and I haven't been dating since about March. I mean nothing in telling you this other than just updating you because you are my brother and friend. In Jesus, Beth."

I'll never forget what I did when I read this. I was sitting on my bed in a dormitory in the middle of Zimbabwe. A number of my students were hanging out with me. I immediately started jumping around the room, shouting, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" My African brothers started hugging me without even knowing why I was so excited. I then looked up and Beth was walking toward me with her arms outstretched...Oh, I'm sorry that's a scene from a movie.

A Love Letter

For the next 11 weeks, we're going to focus on one of God's love letters to us. For some of us, it will be like going back to look at something we've read before and maybe forgotten. For others of us, it will be like reading it for the first time. Please turn in your copy of the Scriptures to the New Testament book of Colossians.

The apostle Paul wrote this letter in A.D. 60. He had a long-distance relationship with his recipients because he was 1,000 miles away in a Roman prison. Colosse was located in Asia Minor, which is present-day Turkey. One of the unusual facts of this book is that Paul is writing to a group of people he had never met before. In fact, commentators believe that a man named Epaphras, who was converted under Paul's ministry, started the church. The church was flourishing until some false teachers came and disrupted the growth and confused their theology. Paul's purpose in writing was to encourage the believers and to combat errors in the church.

This false teaching was partly pagan and partly legalistic Judaism. This amalgamation of philosophies, beliefs, and errors is called

“syncretism.” The Jewish element asserted that believers had to observe certain days, deny themselves some types of food, and follow various rituals. The pagan segment emphasized self-denial, the worship of angels, and a mystical wisdom that was available only for those who had special knowledge.

Paul recognized that the most dangerous part of this heresy was the deprecation of Christ, so he focused much of his attention on the supremacy of Jesus. In fact, Colossians is the most Christ-centered book in the entire Bible. That’s one of the reasons we’re studying it right now. In the midst of our cultural confusion about Christ, we must come back to His absolute superiority and preeminence. There’s a lot of mixing of views today, isn’t there? People borrow a little from this and a little from that. I call it “pop theology.” It comes from movies, MTV, books and philosophies that have their root in the same beliefs that surfaced in Colossae.

Colossians is one of Paul’s shortest letters but also one of the most exciting. We’re encouraged to explore the treasures of the gospel and to order our lives accordingly under the lordship of Christ. We’ll see that wrong doctrine always leads to wrong living. While we’re going to go through it section by section, it’s important to keep in mind that this is primarily a letter, meant to be read as a whole. Colossians 4:16 encourages us to read it out loud, which we will do throughout the series. In order to fully comprehend it, you might want to consider reading the entire book a couple times each week for the next three months.

Introduction

Let’s begin by looking at the first two verses: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.”

Following the standard form of letter writing in the first century, Paul starts by introducing himself and greeting his readers. The name “Paul” means “little.” He was nothing in himself but was called to be an “apostle of Christ Jesus.” The word “apostle” derives from a verb that means, “to send on a mission.” Paul was not one of the 12 original apostles, but he had a special commission by the “will of God.” He did not choose the career of an apostle but was selected by Jesus Himself in Acts 9:15 where we read, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.”

Paul was not writing this alone but with “Timothy our brother.” Paul understood the importance of partnership in ministry. Timothy was not an apostle but was extremely close to Paul. They didn’t have that much in common Paul was older, more cultured, had more money, and was better educated. And yet, Timothy was his brother, and their brother. The church understood itself from the very beginning as family. Jesus loves to break down natural barriers between people. When we share Jesus in common, we have everything in common! Isn’t it great to become good friends with another believer who is totally different than you are? As a result of faith in Jesus, we become members of the family of God and brothers and sisters with one another.

Having introduced himself, Paul next greets the congregation as “the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse.” The word “holy” means to be “set apart” by God. Some of your translations use the word “saints” here. We are not holy by our own efforts to please God but are transformed into a holy people by a holy God. We are saints by virtue of our position in Christ. “Faithful brothers” refers to the fact that even in the midst of false doctrine, many of them were dependable and faithful to the truth.

I want you to notice that these believers were “in” Christ and “at” Colosse. In the Greek, this is the same preposition. They were in Christ and in Colosse. The same is true for us. You are in Christ and in Pontiac, or wherever you live. We’re called to live out our position in Christ in the context of where we live and work. Faithful believers are also public witnesses. Our position in Christ and our proclamation within our culture are inextricably linked. Because we belong to Jesus, we must call others to believe. We are citizens of heaven on site in Livingston County.

Paul continues his greeting by saying, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father.” The word “grace” comes from gentile culture and “peace” has its roots in the Jewish understanding of “shalom.” Paul didn’t use the customary Greek salutation “hail or greetings,” which can mean something like “hey” or “what’s up?” Instead, he chose the word that means “grace,” or unmerited favor. Only God the Father can offer grace and peace. Grace always precedes peace. Grace is the provision for the Christian life. Peace is the enjoyment of those provisions. If someone does not have peace in their life, it may be because they’ve not yet experienced grace. When we receive grace, we will have peace with God, we’ll experience the peace of God and we’ll have the means to be at peace with others.

Now, as we look at Col 1:3-8, it’s important to keep in mind that this passage is one long sentence in the Greek and is built around the subject of thanksgiving. Paul is overwhelmed with thankfulness about three things he’s thankful for the Colossians in Col 1:3-5a, he’s thankful for the gospel in Col 1:5b-6, and he’s thankful for Epaphras in Col 1:7-8.

Thankful for Colossians

Take a look at Col 1:3-5a: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints -- the faith and love that spring from the hope that is

stored up for you in heaven..."

Even though Paul needs to address some problems at Colosse, he begins by expressing his thankfulness to God for the church. He uses the pronoun "we" to emphasize the corporate nature of his ministry. Thanksgiving must be part of every prayer that we pray. Notice that Paul says that he "always" gives thanks. This was his practice and habit. The word "thanks" here comes from the Greek word that is translated, "Eucharist," which refers to the Lord's Supper. Communion is to be a time of thankfulness for what Jesus has done on the Cross.

As we learned last week, when David was overwhelmed by the generosity of His people, he gave thanks to God. Likewise, even though Paul had heard some good things about the Colossians, he directed his thanks to the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul's frequent use of "Father" alludes to an important Old Testament metaphor for God's covenantal relationship with His people

In the first three verses, Paul is already laying the groundwork for the major teaching of Colossians: The Supremacy of Christ. In verse 2, he uses the phrase, "in Christ." Here in Col 1:3, he refers to "Our Lord Jesus Christ." This triple name expresses the divinity, humanity, and messianic office of the Savior. The title "Lord" refers to His deity. He is God and Lord of all. The name "Jesus" speaks of his incarnation. He was born into the human race and walked on this earth. "Christ" reminds us that He came as the sacrifice for our sins as the promised Messiah.

Paul then focuses on a triad of thanksgiving. Even though he had never visited the Christians at Colosse, he heard of their faith, their love, and their hope. This is very similar to what he wrote in 1 Thessalonians 1:3: "We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." While these three virtues are linked together in other passages, the phrase is not a mere formula, thrown in for effect, but a genuine statement in which each word is profoundly significant.

Faith is mentioned first because it is the starting place for everything else in the Christian life. They weren't commended because they had a commodity of faith but because they had put their trust and confidence "in Christ Jesus." It's amazing to me that the testimony of their faith reached all the way to Paul in a Roman prison. I wonder if people in my own neighborhood would commend me for my faith?

The vertical dimension of faith then leads to the horizontal element of love. Because of what Jesus had done in their lives, they were able to love "all" the saints. Paul uses the article "the" in front of love to make it more concrete. Love is not an abstract principle or even a gushy feeling. This love is agape, which has sacrifice as its key character and is displayed in actions. Love is a transforming act because it is really faith in motion as Galatians 5:6 says, "...the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."

This church is full of love. This past week our family received some gift certificates from the church. When we went to the store to buy some things, the cashier told me that she's heard that PBC is a very loving place. She then leaned forward a bit and said, "Your church is more loving than mine." That's not a bad reputation to have, is it?

Truth faith always produces love. You can tell when someone exhibits genuine faith in Christ when they demonstrate unconditional love for imperfect Christ followers. It will be easy to love believers in heaven because they won't have a capacity for sin. It's much more difficult to love fellow Christians now because they still sin, just like we do. Love is the greatest characteristic and the greatest commandment of the Christian faith. Are you exhibiting it in your life today?

Our shared faith and mutual love result in our common "hope that is stored up for you in heaven." Faith and love spring from hope because hope is the root, faith is the plant and love is the fruit. Because God has "laid up" hope for us in heaven, we can have full confidence in our faith and express our love without holding back. We don't have to vaguely wish for something better to come when we have complete confidence in the reality of heaven.

Why have faith in Christ if there is no hope for a glorious future? Why love others if it doesn't matter in the end? Hope makes all the difference because we have a confident expectation that everything God says in His Word is true today, or will come true in the future. Hope is stored up for us like a treasure. God guarantees our salvation in eternity. We can blow it down here but we will never lose our salvation because we didn't do anything to get it in the first place.

I see people all the time who have no hope. Without it, we end up without any anchor for our life. There's nothing worse than seeing someone grieve because they have no hope.

Thankful for the Gospel

Paul is thankful for the faith, love, and hope of the Colossians. In verses 5b-6 we see that he is grateful for the gospel itself: "...and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth."

These verses reveal four key elements about the gospel.

1. The Gospel is the truth of God. The last part of verse 5 helps us see that our hope is based solidly upon the “word of truth, the gospel that has come to you.” The word of truth and the gospel are the same thing. “Gospel” simply means “good news.” The verb form means to “preach or proclaim good news.” The gospel is to be shared with others because it is the word of truth. There is no other truth worth proclaiming.

2. The Gospel is for the whole world. Paul is rejoicing because this gospel is going “all over the world.” The gospel that has come to the city of Colosse is the same gospel going around the globe. God has one message of good news, one word of truth for everyone. That’s why we support 18 different missionaries and organizations that are committed to proclaim the good news of the gospel. We’re not just focused on our community but are called to impact the continents as well. Keith and Carol Wilson are presently in process of raising their support so that they can minister with Global Missions Fellowship. That’s what we’re called to do as a church.

3. The Gospel produces life and growth. Look at verse 6: “...this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it...” The grammar here indicates that there is an innate energy in the message of the gospel. The gospel is alive, growing, spreading, bearing fruit, and spreading some more. When the gospel is heard and believed, lives change radically. I can personally attest to this in my own life. This past Wednesday was my 22nd spiritual birthday! According to Romans 1:16, the gospel is the power of God. This word “power” comes from the word “dunamis,” or dynamite. The gospel message is the dynamite of God, to break through hard hearts and sinful habits so that the Fruit of the Spirit can grow and ripen to maturity.

I like the word “growing” in this verse. It reminds me that we’re all in process. I have literally seen the fruit of the gospel all over the world, from Zimbabwe to Mexico. I also see it in our own living room on Sunday nights when members of our Growth Group share how Jesus is changing lives. I don’t know of anything more powerful than the gospel! If you’re not experiencing fruit and you’re not growing, I can guarantee you that there’s nothing wrong with the power source. Spiritual growth should be normal and ordinary for every Christian, not something that seems extraordinary.

4. The Gospel is the grace of God. The last part of verse 6 refers to “God’s grace in all its truth.” The message of God’s truth is a message of grace. You and I cannot earn acceptance before God. Salvation is by grace alone through faith. You don’t have to jump through certain hoops or follow some man-made regulations. One of the false teachings in the church of Colosse was legalism and so Paul establishes that the gospel is the good news of grace. We receive what we don’t deserve, not when we’re good enough, but when we recognize that we’re bad enough to be disqualified from it. Of all the world religions, Christianity alone offers salvation without demands for pious works. The gospel of grace is truly good news. It brings faith, love, hope, and a desire to share it with others.

Thankful for Epaphras

In Col 1:7-8, we see that Paul was thankful for Epaphras because he had been the one to share the life changing message of grace with the Colossian people: “You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.” Epaphras is faith, love and hope in action. He illustrates that the good news of the gospel of grace must be proclaimed.

Paul developed people like Epaphras wherever he went and reminded the Colossians that they had first heard the gospel from one of their own. He was a dear fellow servant and a “faithful minister of Christ.” He faithfully took the message of grace to them and as a result he could be trusted. Epaphras both evangelized Colosse and edified the believers through his teaching. The verb “learned” is the basis of the word “disciple.”

God’s plan has always been to use human instruments to bring forth the gospel to a dying world. Epaphras was faithful in spreading the seed. He wants us to be faithful to Him and to the gospel of grace. Are you? Am I?

This section ends with a report by Epaphras about their “love in the Spirit.” When Epaphras traveled all the way to Rome to tell Paul about these Christ-followers, he told him that they had a Spirit-produced love. The word “told us” was a legal term indicating evidence. This means that he gave the apostle solid proof of their conversion, their subsequent spiritual growth, and their love in the Spirit.

Action Steps

I can think of four action steps based on this passage.

1. Be thankful when you pray. Instead of praying prayers that start with, "Lord, please give me..." let's begin our prayers like this: "Thanks, God for all that you've done." Related to this, let's follow Paul's example and actually pray for fellow believers. We'll learn more about how to do this next Sunday. You might want to consider joining the teams that pray on Sunday mornings.

2. Identify one person you have a hard time loving. I'm convinced that there is at least one person in each of our lives who we simply don't like. Ask God to help you love this individual in the Spirit. You'll need God's help here. Thank Him for the opportunity you have to put your faith into action. Ask Him to change your heart and He will teach you how to love.

3. Take the next step in your journey of growth. Perhaps you need to plug into a small group or an IMPACT class and allow the good news to become real in your life. Some of you are ready to follow the Lord in baptism on November 4th. If you've never responded to the gospel message by putting your faith in Jesus for forgiveness of sins, then you need to do so! If you don't, your life will never change and you'll enter a tragic eternity.

If there's something keeping you from fruit bearing and growth, determine with God's help, to deal with it. Is there a recurring sin you need to repent of? Do you need greater accountability? You could join the women's Bible study or meet with a group of men on Tuesday mornings. Perhaps you've simply been too busy with things that keep you from what is truly important. Maybe you need to do a better job of prioritizing your church attendance. Ask the Holy Spirit to put His finger on what needs to change and then take the step that He is prodding you to take.

4. Determine this week to share God's grace with at least one person. Take advantage of this window of openness in our country. About a week ago, when I was working out, several of us were talking about how the world might end. Someone on one of the treadmills asked me if I had ever read the "Left Behind" series. I said I did. Just then the guy on the bike next to me started asking questions about what the Bible says about the end times. The next day I brought him a copy of Left Behind, gave him one of my sermons, and a book about the gospel. A couple days ago I was able to follow-up with him. Let's be like Epaphras and share the gospel of grace with those around us.

I want to close by reading something from another letter. This was written by Charles Haddon Spurgeon: "When we were united by faith to Christ, we were brought into such complete fellowship with Him, that we were made one with Him, and His interests and ours became mutual and identical. We have fellowship with Christ in His love. What He loves we love. He loves the saint, and so do we. He loves sinners, and so do we. He loves the poor perishing race of man, and so do we."

Colossians 1:15-23 The Supreme Question Of Life

Summary: Many scholars believe this passage was based on a hymn that was sung by the early church. We all need to answer the question: Is Christ prominent in my life, or is He preeminent? He doesn't just want a place in our lives, He demands first place.

The Supreme Question of Life

In Thursday's Washington Post, an article appeared about a new church in the state of Maryland. I won't reveal the name of the denomination that is behind this endeavor because I don't want to publicly criticize it from the pulpit. You can look it up when this sermon is posted on our web site (see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A12954-2001Oct18.html>.)

Using market research and focus groups, this denomination has designed weekly services that deliberately de-emphasize Jesus Christ. One of the founders of the church has said, "The sad fact is the name of Jesus Christ has become for many people exclusionary." Using Hindu and Zen, intermingled with a few verses from the Bible and recorded music by Willie Nelson, the leader of this group is quoted as saying, "We're enabling people to discover God themselves, maybe through Jesus, maybe through Buddha, maybe through any number of ways."

Most of us are appalled by this defamation of Christianity, and we should be. But before we come down too hard on them, I want to address a very dangerous and deadly disease running rampant in the evangelical church today. At first glance it seems pretty harmless but its spores can infect an entire community. No, I'm not talking about anthrax. I call this malady the virus of practicality and I've been guilty of spreading it. Here's how it works.

Instead of calling people to faith, repentance and submission to the supremacy of Christ, many of us tell people that Jesus wants to give them a happy marriage or a stress-free life. While Jesus will certainly change our lives, our marriages, and our stress levels when we bow before His preeminence, we must move away from “What Jesus can do for me” to “Am I living in light of His lordship?” We don’t simply “add” Jesus to our lives; we adore Him with our lives through our obedience.

That brings us to our text today in the Book of Colossians. Much of the false teaching taking place in Colosse had to do with the minimizing of Jesus. Many people thought He was important but not essential. They had given Him a place in their lives, without recognizing that He demands first place. Jesus was prominent to them, but certainly not preeminent.

Paul refutes at least three misconceptions in Colossians 1:

- The false teachers taught that God did not create the world because in their view matter was evil and God cannot create evil.
- Believing that matter was evil, they argued that God would not have come to earth as a human in bodily form.
- They did not believe that Christ was the unique Son of God but rather one of many intermediaries between God and people.

As we study Colossians 1:15-23 this morning, we come to the pinnacle of Christianity. In Jesus, God’s complete and perfect revelation is fully revealed. Our passage breaks into two natural sections with the last part of verse 18 providing the overriding theme: “...so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”

- The Supremacy of Jesus Over Creation (Col 1:15-17)
- The Supremacy of Jesus Over His New Creation (Col 1:18-23)

Jesus is paramount over everything that He has created in Col 1:15-17 and He’s preeminent over all that He has redeemed in verses 18-23. Another way to say it is that He has first place over both the cosmos and the church. He is Lord of everything He has made and He is Lord over everyone He has saved.

The Supremacy of Jesus Over Creation

This passage is one of the strongest in Scripture as it relates to the superiority of our Savior. Follow along as I read verses 15-17: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” We see 4 truths about Jesus in these verses:

1. He is God (Col 1:15a).

Paul doesn’t mince any words here. Jesus “is the image of the invisible God.” Images convey meaning way beyond what words can describe. My wedding band represents the fact that Beth finally said, “yes” to me! [Show image]. When we see the Statue of Liberty, something unexplainable takes place deep inside, doesn’t it? [Show picture]. And today, perhaps more than ever, the image of the American Flag flying over Ground Zero ignites feelings of patriotism, sadness, and maybe even anger in our hearts [show picture].

As powerful as these symbols are, they are simply representations of far deeper realities. My ring doesn’t make me married. Rather, it’s a symbol that I am married. The Statue of Liberty doesn’t in and of itself do anything. It stands for a nation that honors freedom. The American flag is a powerful national symbol but it only represents what our country is all about.

Listen carefully. Jesus is not just a symbol of God; He is God Himself. The word “image” in Greek is “eikon” and refers to “likeness, manifestation, or replica.” In that culture the “image” was a die or stamp that was able to make exact reproductions. Passports in Paul’s day had a section called “eikon,” or “distinguishing marks,” which described something about the person that set him apart from everyone else. Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. He is the precise copy because He is God Himself. He both represents and manifests God to the world.

John 1:18 says that “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.” That phrase “made him known,” means that Jesus declares, or literally “exegetes,” to the world what God the Father is really like. In John 14:9, Jesus revealed this about Himself: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” In a parallel passage, Hebrews 1:3 says, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being...” 2 Corinthians 4:4 also refers to Christ as the “image of God.” Someone has said that Jesus is God with skin on. That’s a pretty good word picture.

2. He is the unique Son of God (Col 1:15b).

Jesus is not only God; He is the “firstborn over all creation.” Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that this verse teaches that Jesus was a

created being and therefore not God. Actually, the phrase “firstborn” is most frequently translated as “heir or owner.” In ancient time it meant the “ranking one, or supreme one.” Jacob was not born first but he was the heir. This is strongly supported in Psalm 89:27 where we read that God appointed King David as his “firstborn,” even though he was the youngest of eight brothers. This verse concludes by saying that David will be the “most exalted of the kings of the earth.” “Firstborn” therefore is a title of honor or position, not chronological order.

3. He is the creator of all things (Col 1:16).

Jesus is the image of God and the exalted one over all creation because He is the Creator. Lest anyone misunderstand what “firstborn” means, in verse 16 Paul explains that all things were created in, through, and for Christ: “For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him.” Jesus is not a mere man. He is the creator of all things, those things we can see and those things we cannot see. The context of Colossians 1 declares that Jesus is the Sovereign creator, not one who was himself created.

Because the false teachers taught that the physical world was evil, they thought that God Himself could not have created it. They reasoned that if Christ were God, He would be in charge of only the spiritual world. But Paul explained that all the thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers on heaven and earth, of both the visible and invisible world, are under the authority of Christ because He created them.

These four classifications are used elsewhere in Scripture to describe the world of both holy and evil spirit beings. Since the Colossians gave undue prominence to angels, Paul here quickly puts everything under the rule of Christ. Jesus has no rival. This verse also refutes the false teaching that Christ was one of many intermediaries and that angels were to be worshipped. The highest angelic princes are subject to Jesus Christ, whether they be seraphim or cherubim or whether they be demons or Satan himself. Jesus is Lord of all.

Jesus is not only the creator, He provides the purpose for His creation: “all things were created by Him and for Him.” The goal of all creation is to glorify Christ. Revelation 4:11, in the New Living Translation, puts it this way: “...For you created everything, and it is for your pleasure that they exist and were created.”

4. He Holds All Things Together (Col 1:17).

As our country continues to be under attack, it’s important to keep in mind that Jesus holds everything together. Look at verse 17: “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” Jesus existed before everything else as He declared in John 8:58: “Before Abraham was born, I am.”

To “hold together” means to prevent something from falling into complete chaos. Christ is before all things, both in time and rank. He is not only the Creator of the world; He is the cohesion that keeps it all together. By Him everything came to be, and by Him everything continues to be. Hebrews 1:3 reminds us that He holds everything together by His powerful word. If He were to remove His sustaining power, everything would dissolve into disorder.

It was interesting this week to watch two of the network news anchors handle the anthrax story when it hit close to home on their own staff. Tom Brokaw, at the conclusion of the NBC Nightly News on Monday night, signed off by saying, “In Cipro we trust.” On Thursday, looking disheveled and scared; Dan Rather said that we can’t let this make us afraid. Friends, we don’t have to wig out or become unglued because Jesus is keeping everything from falling apart. He upholds everything by the word of His power. Remember that there is no crisis in heaven. He will be exalted among the nations.

The Supremacy of Jesus Over His New Creation

Jesus is supreme over creation in Col 1:15-17. As we turn to verses 18-23, we discover that Jesus is also preeminent over His new creation. The focus shifts from the old natural creation to the new spiritual creation. The creating God is the reconciling God.

We see first that He is head of the church in Col 1:18-19: “And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him.” Paul uses a personal pronoun here that is very emphatic. It literally means, “He Himself is the head.” Only Jesus qualifies to be the head of the church. The word “head” means that Jesus is the authority, or source of the church.

We can relate to that. The head gives the body the ability to produce growth, and without it, the body would die. Many churches seem to forget this. If Jesus Christ is not supreme in a church, then there is no church. That was part of the trouble at Colosse. They had lost connection to Christ and as a result they were experimenting with all sorts of false doctrine and sinful behavior. Jesus is the head of PBC, not me, not the elders, not the deacons. Jesus Christ is supreme over this church and we bow before His authority.

Jesus is the “beginning,” which means that He is the source. The word actually has two meanings, “to rule” and “to begin.”

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "I will build my church." The church is the creation of Christ and as such we must follow His lead. He is the "firstborn from among the dead," signifying that as the supreme one, His resurrection is the guarantee that we too will rise again.

I love Col 1:19. It gives God the Father great joy and pleasure to have all of "His fullness dwell in Jesus." It greatly pleased the Father for the Son to have preeminence over creation and the church. There are three significant truths about Jesus in this verse.

1. The fullness of God dwells "in Him." It was not around, upon, or under Him; rather it was in Him.
2. The word "dwell" means to "take up residence" and points to the incarnation. It is used in the sense of a permanent dwelling and would remind believers of God's desire to choose a place for His name to dwell in the Old Testament. Look at Colossians 2:9: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form."
3. The phrase "all His fullness" is a technical term in the vocabulary of the Gnostic false teachers. It meant the "sum total of all the divine power and attributes." Paul uses this term eight different times in Colossians to show the believers that Jesus is the fullness of God, and no one else. The fact that it pleased the Father to have all His fullness dwell in Christ is proof that Jesus Christ is God. John 1:16: "From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another."

In Col 1:20-23, Paul describes the work of Jesus in reconciling lost people to Himself. As people come to saving faith in Christ and are reconciled to Christ through His blood, they become members of His church, of which He is the head. Verse 20 begins with a general statement about reconciliation: "And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." The false teachers at Colosse were teaching people that they could get closer to God through the worship of angels and by observing certain rules and regulations, but they couldn't promise total and complete reconciliation.

Unger's Bible Dictionary defines reconciliation this way: "The restoration of friendship and fellowship after estrangement. It also means to change thoroughly from one position to another." Reconciliation happens when someone or something is completely altered and adjusted so that a relationship of peace can begin with the one with whom estrangement had taken place. Paul establishes four elements about the reconciliation of Christ in this verse:

The Focus is to "reconcile to Himself." The focus is always to reconcile to God. The initiative and action must come from Him.

The Scope is "all things." Reconciliation involves the whole universe.

The Result is "peace." Through Jesus, our hostility with God can end.

The Means is "through His blood, shed on the cross." Salvation is only through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross as our sin payment.

Col 1:21 moves from the general to the specific. Paul reminds us what we were like before we experienced peace with God: "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior."

We were "alienated." One dictionary defines "alienate" as "to estrange; to withdraw; to make indifferent or averse where love or friendship before existed." We use the word "alien" to refer to strangers or outsiders. Apart from the grace of God, all of us are estranged from God.

We were "enemies." We were not just alienated; the Bible says that we were actively hostile to God.

Our "minds" were at war with God. Romans 8:7: "The mind of sinful man is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so."

Our behavior was "evil." Bad thoughts often lead to bad behavior. What's inside will come out.

One early Baptist pastor expressed the biblical doctrine of depravity with great clarity: "Man, by nature, is destitute of all holy principles and desires; there is nothing in his character which is pleasing in the sight of God...all the actions that he performs, even those which are in themselves excellent and lovely, are still the service of an alien and a rebel, and consequently an abomination in the sight of heaven. Every imagination of the thought of his heart is only evil continually." (Founders Journal, Summer 1996, page 6).

Paul's intention is not to dwell on what they were apart from Christ. Despite these negative traits, God took the initiative in verse 22 and extended grace: "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." Notice that it was "Christ's physical body" that reconciled us. The false teachers in Colosse denied that Jesus had a real human body. The New Testament makes it abundantly clear that Jesus was both God and man. 1 Peter 2:24: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you are healed."

The purpose behind the pleasure of the Father and the reconciliation of the Son is “to present” saved sinners in heaven for all eternity. That phrase “present” was used when someone inspected a potential sacrifice to God before offering it to Him. It’s the same word used in Romans 12:1 when referring to the Christian presenting his body to God as a living sacrifice. This word was also used when an individual would make a case to a just God. Because of what Jesus did on the cross, He is both sacrifice and justifier so that our sins can be forgiven and we can be declared righteous before a holy judge.

Let’s look at the three results of our reconciliation:

1. “Holy in His sight.” We are “set apart” and declared holy by God.
2. “Without blemish.” This word was applied to the Temple sacrifices, which had to be free from any faults or blotches. When God looks at you, He sees no blemishes!
3. “Free from accusation.” This is a legal term, which literally means, “not to be called in.” No charge of condemnation or sentence of eternal death can ever be brought against believers in the court of divine justice. Romans 8:33-34: “Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.”

Paul’s emphasis on our holy standing before God was a direct attack on the false teachers. They promised a kind of “perfection” for those who had secret and mystical knowledge. In essence, Paul is saying, “You already have a perfect standing in Christ, you are holy in His sight, without any blemish, and free from any accusation. Why seek for it anywhere else?”

I’ll never forget an illustration that my friend Ray Pritchard used many years ago when he was trying to communicate the depth of what Jesus has done for us. He held up his hand and told us that it represented our position before God. We are alienated because of our sin. We are enemies in His sight. Our minds are at war with Him and our behavior is evil. Our hand forms a fist that we shake in the face of a holy God. He then took a white handkerchief out of his pocket and placed it over his fist to represent the work of Jesus on the Cross. Now, when God looks at us, He sees Jesus. We have been declared holy, without blemish, and free from any accusation.

Let’s finish by looking at the last part of our passage, verse 23: “If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel...” The “if” clause does not mean that a believer can lose his salvation if he fails to “continue in the faith.” This can be translated, “If indeed you continue in the faith, and I believe that you are doing so.” This is how the word is used in Colossians 3:1: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ...”

Paul is using an architectural image when he says, “established and firm, not moved...” The town of Colosse was located in a region known for earthquakes, and the word translated “moved” can mean “earthquake stricken.” Just as a house, firmly set on the foundation will not move, so too, if you are truly saved and built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, then you will continue in your faith. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 7:24, 26: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...but everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand.”

The Supreme Question of Life

We’ve discovered at least seven characteristics about Christ this morning:

- He is the image of the invisible God (15)
- He is the firstborn over all creation (15)
- He created all things (16)
- He is the head of the body, the church (18)
- He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead (18)
- He has the fullness of God dwelling in Him (19)
- He is reconciling all things to Himself (20)

Contrary to what the leaders of that organization in Maryland have said (I can’t even call it a church): Jesus Christ is exclusionary and must remain so! Because of His supremacy over all things, each of us must face a question this morning. Is Jesus supreme in your life? Is He supreme in my life?

I used to encourage people to “make” Jesus Lord in their lives but then I learned that Scripture never speaks of anyone “making” Him Lord, except God Himself in Acts 2:36+: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” He is Lord of all.

John MacArthur hits it on the head when he says, “The biblical mandate for both sinners and saints is not to ‘make’ Christ Lord, but rather to bow to His lordship. He is ever and always Lord, whether or not anyone acknowledges His lordship or surrenders to His authority.” (The Gospel According to Jesus, 1988, page 203).

On Monday, Paul Harvey, during his noon broadcast, reminded his listeners that Billy Graham’s words were heard all around the world when he spoke at the National Cathedral several weeks ago. Mr. Harvey then quoted from the Book of Daniel and the Gospel of Mark, stating that the gospel would be preached to the whole world and then the end would come. He then paused and said this: “To some of you this brings great comfort. To others of you, if it’s not comforting, you can make it so.”

Friends, it’s time to make it so. Some of you have never surrendered yourself to Christ by receiving Him into your life for forgiveness of sins. If you have never done that, you are still alienated, you are an enemy of God, your mind is at war with him, and your behavior is evil. Bow before Him right now and receive forgiveness of sins and be declared holy, without blemish and free from accusation.

Others of you have already been converted but perhaps you’re living for yourself and not in recognition of the supremacy of Christ. For some of you, Jesus is prominent in your life, but He is not preeminent. He has a place in your world, but He does not occupy first place. Maybe you’ve mistakenly thought you could just “add” Him to your life without bowing before His all-encompassing authority. It’s time to surrender completely to Him. Maybe baptism is the next step for you.

Philippians 2:10-11 provides a fitting close to our time this morning: “That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Sooner or later, everyone will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Let’s make it sooner. Let’s make it so right now.

If you are ready to receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, as your Forgiver and Leader, would you please stand?

If you are already a believer and you want to rededicate your life to him, would you please stand?

Let’s all stand together to symbolize our submission to the supremacy of Jesus and repeat this together: Jesus Christ is Lord! He’s Lord of Creation. He’s Lord of His Church and He’s Lord of me!

Colossians 1:24-2:5 Discovering Your Purpose

Summary: As we understand the ramifications of Christ dwelling within us, we will strive for maturity in our faith and can become all that God desires for us to be.

A truck driver was hauling a load of 500 penguins to the zoo. Unfortunately, his truck broke down. He eventually waved down another truck and offered the driver \$500 to take the penguins to the zoo.

The next day the first truck driver got his truck fixed and drove into town and couldn’t believe his eyes! Just ahead of him he saw the second truck driver crossing the road with the 500 penguins waddling single file behind him. He jumped out of his truck, ran up to the guy and said, “What’s going on? I gave you \$500 to take these penguins to the zoo!”

To which the man responded, “I did take them to the zoo. But I had enough money left over so now we’re going to the movies.”

That guy didn’t fully understand what he was supposed to be doing. Likewise, many believers today are fuzzy about their sense of purpose. Last week we focused on the ultimate question of life by looking at the supremacy of Christ over His creation and His church. We ended with a challenge to make sure that Jesus occupies first place in each of our lives. As we come to the next section of Colossians, we’ll discover our reason for living. Colossians 1:24-2:5 answers the question, “Now that Jesus is supreme in my life, what is my purpose as a believer?”

This passage gives us six strategic statements that will help us discover what we’ve been designed to do.

1. Suffer Joyfully for the Gospel

We might not expect this first one to even be included in the list, but Col 1:24 makes it clear that Paul saw suffering as part of the job description of a Christ follower: “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.” Paul willingly and joyfully suffered on behalf of others for the sake of

the gospel. The little word “now” does more than just provide a transition. Paul is rejoicing precisely because of what he has just written and he’s rejoicing now (at present) while in prison.

Most of us try to get rid of suffering when it comes our way. When we’re in pain, we want to relieve it. Paul was different. He found joy in what he suffered. In 2 Corinthians 7:4 he declares, “...In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.” And he suffered far more than most of us ever will. Listen to what he writes in 2 Corinthians 11:24-29: “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?”

Before Paul’s conversion, he inflicted suffering on believers. And now he’s suffering for them. From the very moment of his conversion, in Acts 9:16, Paul was told that difficulty was going to be part of his discipleship when Jesus said: “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

When Paul speaks of “filling up in his flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions,” he is not implying that there is some insufficiency in what Christ accomplished on the cross. As we learned last week in Colossians 1:22, we have been reconciled by “Christ’s physical body through death to present us holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.” His death has brought us peace with God and there’s nothing left to be done, except to respond to what He has done on our behalf.

The word “afflictions” is never used of the sufferings of Jesus on the cross, but instead refers to the “pressures” of life that Paul endured. Christ suffered in death to save the church, and now Paul suffered in life to spare it. John Piper writes that “Christ’s cross was for propitiation; ours is for propagation. Christ suffered to accomplish salvation. We suffer to spread salvation.” (Sermon by John Piper: “Called to Suffer and Rejoice,” 8/30/92).

Paul suffered for at least three reasons. First, he was suffering because of Jesus Christ. Like the early believers in Acts 5:41, Paul rejoiced that he was “counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” Second, he suffered because of the Gentiles. Paul was committed to take the gospel to all people, not just to those who thought they were worthy of it. In fact, he was in prison precisely because he had taken the good news to the Gentiles in Acts 22:21-22. In Philippians 1:12 Paul wrote from prison: “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” Third, he suffered for the sake of Christ’s body, the church. As the believers saw him suffer, it gave them courage to face persecution in their lives.

Since the church is Christ’s body today, when Paul suffered, Christ suffered. What Jesus began as suffering with his persecution and rejection on earth, believers complete in His continuing body on earth. As such, we should not be surprised when we go through tough times. Jesus stated in John 15:20, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” Another way to say it is that when the gospel is carried to the ends of the earth, it will be accompanied with difficulty. In fact, in order to share the gospel, it is necessary to share in Christ’s afflictions. We’re going to focus on this next Sunday as we participate in the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

Paul’s understanding of persecution, difficulty, and suffering can help us when affliction visits our life. Verse 24 reminds us to suffer joyfully for the gospel. In order to do so, we must keep the following in mind:

- Suffering is part of discipleship. Christ followers are recognized by the trials they endure because they follow a suffering Savior. 1 Peter 4:12: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.”
- We know Jesus best when we suffer with Him. Philippians 3:10: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in death.”
- Suffering is a privilege as we see in 1 Peter 4:13: “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”
- Suffering produces greater faith and accelerates character development. Romans 5:3-4: “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

How far are you willing to go in suffering for the gospel? Most of us frankly would be better off if we faced some persecution. That leads to the second purpose statement.

2. Serve According to Your Calling

Look at Col 1:25-27: “I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness--

the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” As Paul likes to do, he refers to himself as a servant. Since Jesus was supreme in His life, Paul was fully devoted to follow Him wholeheartedly. This word “servant” can be translated, “minister.” The word “commission” means “management” or “stewardship.” Just as a well-trusted servant would manage his master’s estate, so Paul was entrusted with a special task.

That task was to present the “word of God in its fullness.” Paul was a servant and his calling was to fully make known the Word of God. I recognize my responsibility to preach the Word of God in its fullness. That means that I won’t shrink away from communicating the Bible, even when it’s not popular. Someone has said that a pastor’s job is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. That sounds like something the apostle Paul would agree with. That’s why we preach about heaven and hell, that’s why we proclaim that Jesus is the only way to a relationship with God, and that’s why we are unashamedly committed to the sanctity of human life. PBC stands on the Bible and is committed to presenting the Word of God in its fullness.

The false teachers in Colosse believed that spiritual perfection was a hidden plan, or mystery, that only a few privileged people could discover. Paul defines this mystery as God calling all people everywhere to faith in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles. Ephesians 3:6 makes the mystery clear: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

The mystery is actually Christ in us, the hope of glory. I continue to be amazed at how God would allow me to experience salvation through Christ. I certainly don’t deserve it, and neither do you. When we contemplate the magnitude of this truth, we will engage our time, our talents, and our treasures and serve accordingly.

In this month’s issue of Focus on the Family magazine, Martha Williamson, a born-again believer, and the executive producer of the popular TV show, “Touched By An Angel,” reveals what brings her the most satisfaction in her life: “One of my greatest joys are the letters that tell what a wonderful witnessing tool the show has been.” Martha Williamson is serving according to her calling.

One of my favorite things as a pastor is to watch believers get fired up to serve in areas that are a perfect match for who God created them to be. This past week, Bob Caughey and I met with Ned Graf in order to put some plans together for the new Prayer Partner ministry, which you will be hearing more about in the near future. Ned’s vision is to have a group of people meet every Sunday morning both before and during the services to pray. He’s presented the idea to about 80 people already in small groups and can’t wait to share it with more! Ned understands that he is serving the commission that God has given him.

Are you serving according to your calling? If not, you don’t know what you’re missing! As we serve, we then come to the third purpose.

3. Move People to Maturity

Look at Col 1:28: “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.” Paul shifts back to “we” in this verse to let them know that he and Epaphras were proclaiming the good news, and the false teachers were not. The Greek text is quite emphatic: “Him we proclaim!” The word “proclaim” refers to an official proclamation, like when someone would speak on behalf of the emperor. It meant official business was being spoken and therefore was to be accurate and clear, and delivered with authority.

We are to proclaim Christ, which is exactly what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:5: “For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.” When we talk to others about our faith, we must always focus on Christ, not on ourselves. Notice that the word “everyone” is repeated twice, which shows that every single believer is capable of Christian maturity. This central task is linked to a twofold emphasis.

The first word “admonishing,” carries with it the idea of warning, or helping to set someone’s mind into proper order. Paul didn’t hold back when he thought someone needed to be warned about what they were doing or about what they believed. We need to be willing to admonish one another in a spirit of love, as well as receive warning and correction when we need it.

The second emphasis is on “teaching,” which refers to the clear communication of the Word of God. Instruction in creed and conduct is critical to Christian growth. That’s why it’s the first purpose of our IMPACT statement. Jesus left us the responsibility in Matthew 28:20 to teach disciples to obey everything He commanded. We need to look for opportunities to teach and we need to make sure we’re taking advantage of learning opportunities.

An effective presentation of the gospel always includes both warning and teaching. The warning is that without Christ, people are lost and headed to the agony of hell. The teaching is that salvation is available only by grace through faith in Christ.

The goal of proclaiming Christ through admonishment and teaching is so that we can “present everyone perfect in Christ.” Paul was a perfectionist in the sense that he desperately wanted everyone to become complete in Christ. The word perfect means “full grown,

or spiritually mature.” Our job as a church is not just to admonish, or even to teach. We do those things in order to create spiritually mature Christ-followers. We should all be in the process of growth, of becoming more like Jesus every day. Our focus is not on numerical growth, but on spiritual growth. We don’t want to just build buildings; we want to build believers. We’re all about transformation, not just information.

If you want to help make an impact in people’s lives, I encourage you to consider becoming a small group leader. We’ve had so many people join groups recently that we now need a number of new leaders and groups!

If we’re serious about moving people to maturity then we can’t be passive or lazy. Instead, we must...

4. Work Wholeheartedly with His Energy

Look at Col 1:29 and Col 2:1 : “To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.”

When Paul says, “To this end I labor,” he’s referring to proclaiming Christ and presenting believers. He labors and struggles in this task. To “labor” means to “grow weary through hard toil.” The word “struggle” comes from the root word in Greek translated “agony.” Both words were used of athletes competing in the arena, or of a laborer working to the point of exhaustion. Paul used this same word at the end of his life as he reflected on how he had lived in 2 Timothy 4:7: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

We’re called to lay ourselves out, to become spiritually fatigued in order to move people toward full devotion to Christ. I’m humbled by the many people who minister here at PBC with that kind of determination. If you’re tired and wiped out as you reach out to others, you’re in the company of the apostle Paul...and the AWANA team that worked on the Fun Fest yesterday!

Notice that Paul doesn’t just work in his own strength; He instead relies on the power of Christ as he struggles “with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me.” There’s a play on words in the Greek text here. We might translate it this way: “Striving according to His energy which powerfully energizes within me.” Paul surrendered his availability to God’s ability.

Since Christ is in us, the hope of glory, He will provide us with His supernatural strength and explosive energy as we labor to propel people to maturity. Do you see the cooperation and combined effort between Christ and us? The work of salvation is “all of Christ and none of me” but in order to live out my purpose it must be “all of Christ and all of me.” This is another mystery that God would choose to use you and me, in spite of our weaknesses, in order to help people become mature in Christ.

Friends, don’t hold back. Let’s not become spiritually lethargic or lukewarm. Let’s burn bright and take it up a notch as we labor and lean on Christ for His strength. In our efforts to help people, Paul next clarifies what this involves.

5. Enrich the Lives of Others

Look at Col 2:2-3: “My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Paul very clearly states that his longing is for believers to be encouraged in heart. The word “encouraged” means “to call alongside.” The picture is of someone trying to move a heavy object when another person comes to help out. A discouraged individual has lost “courage.” When we come alongside, God can use us to pour some courage back in. Paul gave similar instruction in 1 Thessalonians 5:11: “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are now doing.”

We’re to enrich one another through encouragement and we’re to do whatever it takes to be “united in love.” This is a medical metaphor that means to be “knit together in love.” As members of the body of Christ, we’re not to be out of joint with anyone. Did you notice that it’s impossible to fulfill these responsibilities unless we’re living in community with one another? You can’t do it alone. Everyone here needs you, and you need everyone else. Do you know of anyone who seems a bit low today? If so, do what it takes to encourage him or her. Are you out of sync with someone? Anyone you’ve been avoiding because of some conflict or hurt feelings? Meet face-to-face and make things right.

When believers are encouraged and united, they will have the “full riches of complete understanding.” As we take responsibility for one another, we’ll understand and know Christ more fully. As we get to know Him better, we’ll discover treasures of wisdom and knowledge, which are hidden in Christ. Lost people cannot understand the real meaning of life because they don’t have Christ. It’s hidden from them until they bow before His supremacy.

While the false teachers taught that secret knowledge was reserved only for those who were initiated into their mysteries, Paul tells them to be fully assured of their relationship with Christ. Genuine wisdom is centered in a person, not in facts written on paper. The key to obtaining this treasure is found in the final purpose statement.

6. Delight in Obedience

Let's focus on Col 2:4-5: "I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is." Just as one germ can infect the entire body, Paul recognized the threat of false teaching. These teachers deceived by using faulty logic and by enticing people with words that sounded good. Their error was carefully packaged and presented. Paul did not focus on fine-sounding arguments in 1 Corinthians 2:4: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power."

Paul delighted in their obedience. The phrases "orderly" and "firm" are military terms. Paul is there in spirit, like a general inspecting the troops before battle. Orderly soldiers were those who had no breaks or breaches in their ranks. It's the picture of the wall builders in Nehemiah, who worked as a team, with their swords at their side (see Nehemiah 4:18). The emphasis of "order" is on individuality. Everyone is doing his or her part. "Firmness" points to a "solid front," with the focus on corporate strength, as the soldiers line up in battle formation.

This military terminology helps us see that through our discipline and obedience we can be prepared for any kind of battle. We must each do our part, and we must stand united.

Inventory

How are you doing in each of these six areas? Let me list them again.

- Are you suffering joyfully for the gospel?
- Are you serving according to your calling?
- Are you moving people to maturity?
- Are you working wholeheartedly with His energy?
- Are you enriching the lives of others?
- Are you delighting in obedience?

If you feel a bit aimless, or even bored in your life, then reenlist for active duty in God's army. It's much better to do battle together than to battle each other, and it's much better to understand your purpose than to go on a walk with a bunch of penguins

Colossians 2:6-15 Deepening Your Roots

Summary: It's important to not just focus on our conversion—we're called to demonstrate our commitment on a daily basis by going deeper with God.

Deepening Your Roots

During our "Building for the Future" emphasis, I prepared a five-minute sermon on a cassette tape to help explain the key ingredients of our campaign. I received a lot of very positive feedback. Most of the accolades I received had more to do with the length than with the content! People were surprised that I could preach such a short sermon. I have good news for you this morning, while I won't be preaching a five-minute sermon, I will be preaching a shorter message. This is by design because we wanted to give ample time in the service to celebrate communion and to pray for the persecuted church. We'll focus on three verses from Colossians 2 and pick up the rest next Sunday.

Last week we focused on our purpose for living. Here's a quick summary:

1. Suffer joyfully for the gospel.
2. Serve according to your calling.
3. Move people to maturity.
4. Work wholeheartedly with His energy.
5. Enrich the lives of others.
6. Delight in obedience.

As we live out our purpose, we quickly realize that Christian growth is a process. We become Christians in an instant when we receive Christ Jesus the Lord, but it takes a lifetime to live out our faith. Our focus should not just be on knowing, our emphasis must

also be on growing. The Bible links information with transformation we're to become what we've begun. Truth must be perceived and then personalized because biblical belief always leads to action. Faith that does not have an impact on one's behavior is not true faith. Or, as James 2:17 says, "...Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

Do you know what a mixed metaphor is? A mixed metaphor combines two or more images that don't seem to make sense. Here are some examples:

- You've buttered your bread...now lie in it
- Clearly we've opened a Pandora's box...of worms
- Burning the midnight oil... at both ends
- Marching to the beat... of a dead horse
- It's time to step up to the plate... and cut the mustard
- Robbing Peter... to pay the Piper

In Colossians 2:6-7, Paul mixes several metaphors in order to describe the process of spiritual growth: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness." Many commentators believe that this is the theme of the entire book, sort of like the hinge point of Colossians.

On the faith side, the Colossians had received Christ Jesus as Lord and had been taught the faith. On the practice side, they needed to continue to live in Him and be built up in Him, becoming strengthened in their faith and overflowing with thankfulness.

Paul uses 6 word pictures of spiritual progress.

1. Soldier. This first picture is a review from Col 2:5: "...to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is." As we learned last week, as members of God's army we are to be solidly united against the enemy, as each of us practice discipline and strive to obey our Supreme Commanding Officer. We're not to battle against each other, but to do battle with each other as we serve side-by-side.

2. Power Walker. The Christian life must be lived out. It's to go from our head, to our heart, to our hands, and then to our feet. When Paul says, "Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him," he's reminding his readers that since they received Jesus by faith, so too they must walk by faith in His power. That's the only way to make spiritual progress. The verb indicates continuous action we are to continue to live in Him. The past event of receiving Christ should be a present reality in our lives. Our conduct must be consistent with His lordship. Our worship should affect our walk and our practice must conform to our principles.

The Colossians had not merely received the doctrines of Christ; they had received Christ Himself. The title, "Christ Jesus as Lord" is unique, occurring only here in Paul's letters. As Christ, He is identified as the Messiah, or "anointed one," promised to Adam, Abraham, and Moses and prophesied about by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah. Jesus was his human name given at His birth and means Savior. Lord indicates that He is supreme and sovereign. He has no rivals and we must bow before His preeminence.

3. Tree. In this agricultural metaphor, just as a tree is "rooted," we are to be grounded in the soil of God's Word. The tense of the Greek word means, "once and for all having been rooted." Those who have received Christ are rooted in Him. A tree puts down deep roots in order to find nutrition and to provide stability. Likewise, we must go deep with Christ in order to find the fuel we need to flourish, and in order to withstand the storms of life.

This image most likely comes from the beautiful picture in Jeremiah 17:8: "He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." When we are rooted in a relationship with Christ, we will have everything we need for life and for godliness as 2 Peter 1:3 declares. Just as a tree cannot thrive without any roots, so too, we cannot grow if we have not been grounded in "His glory and goodness."

4. Building. Paul next moves to a construction image to show that as our foundation is built on Christ, we must continue to add on so that we're "being built up in him." Ephesians 2:20 tells us that at conversion we were "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone." A cornerstone was a big stone placed at the intersecting angle, where two walls of a building came together. In biblical times, buildings were often made of cut rock. By uniting two intersecting walls, a cornerstone helped align the whole structure and tie it together. In the same way, as the chief cornerstone, Jesus holds everything together and provides alignment to our lives.

The Family Life Center wouldn't be of much use with just a foundation. The base is laid in order to build a strong building. God doesn't want us to stop with conversion; instead He longs for us to construct our lives as 1 Corinthians 3:12 states with "gold, silver,

and costly stones” instead of using things that don’t last like wood, hay, and straw. In order to be strong, we must build with solid materials. Again, the tense of the verb indicates that the building keeps on going. The Christian life is not meant to be a one or two-story house, but rather a skyscraper that just keeps going up!

5. Student. The next metaphor is found in the phrase, “strengthened in the faith as you were taught.” We’re to be students in God’s graduate school so that our faith can be strengthened, or established. By the way, Colossians 2:7 is where the 2:7 Discipleship Course gets its name. As students, we must be taught the Word of God in order to grow in our faith. That’s why we hear us talk so much about the importance of every believer plugging into a small group. We don’t want to just be a church that has small groups; we are a church that is made up of small groups. Since a disciple must always be learning, make sure you are putting yourself in an environment where you can study and be strengthened on a regular basis.

6. River. This word picture of a river bursting over its banks is based on the phrase, “overflowing with thankfulness.” As we receive instruction in biblical truth it should produce inner joy. The more we understand grace, the more gratitude we will have. Kent Hughes writes, “A thankless spirit betrays a life which is no longer focusing on the greatness of Christ.” If you don’t feel very thankful today, it’s probably because you’ve taken your eyes off of Jesus and put them on your problems. If you’re in town two weeks from Wednesday, I encourage you to attend our annual Thanksgiving service. We’ll sing some, and read Scripture, and then give you an opportunity to publicly express your thankfulness. It’s one of my favorite services of the entire year!

Live It Out

These two verses challenge us to...

- Grow downward by being “rooted”
- Grow upward by being “built up”
- Grow inward so that we can be “strengthened in the faith”
- Grow outward as we “overflow with thankfulness”

As Paul mixes up his metaphors, he also changes his verb tenses in order to show what has happened to us, and what we are responsible for. In this list of 6 word pictures, there are only two active verbs: to live in Him and to be thankful. Our living should lead to thanksgiving. Our task is to live surrendered to His supremacy and to abound in the giving of thanks for what God has done for us in Christ.

Be On Guard

Drop down to Col 2:8: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”

When we lived in Mexico, the American Embassy issued several warnings to Americans to be on constant guard against kidnapping. Beth and I were vigilant every single day. Whenever we were out we always kept our girls right by our side.

The false teachers used seductive tactics so the believers had to “see to it” that they didn’t let down their guard and be captured by philosophy that was contrary to Christ.

What could be wrong with philosophy since it simply means “the love of wisdom”?

First, it’s “hollow.” Many of the philosophies we hear of today when compared with the reality of human existence are far off the mark because they are empty.

The second characteristic is that this philosophy is “deceptive.” It may sound good but it is designed to lead people astray.

The third reason we are to be on guard is that these empty and deceptive philosophies “depend on human tradition.” They arise out of the thinking of men, find a foothold in society, and then are passed along from generation to generation so as to appear popular and widely supported. Hardly anyone dares question them because it seems like everybody believes them. One obvious example today is the theory of evolution.

Fourthly, this philosophy depends on “the basic principles of this world.” This refers to “things in a row,” and became associated with the alphabet. These basic principles refer to the elementary stages of religious idolatry, or even the worship of fallen angels.

No man-made religion can lead to truth, for truth can be found only in Christ. As something hollow, philosophy cannot fill anyone except with more emptiness. By contrast, Colossian 1:25 says that we have received the Word of God in “its fullness” and Colossian 2:2 reminds us that because we know Christ, we have the “full riches of complete understanding.”

If we put these three verses together we can conclude by saying that a grounded, growing and grateful believer will not be led astray.

You don't have to worry about being spiritually kidnapped if you are a soldier, a power walker, a tree, a building, a student, and an overflowing river.

I want to close this morning with a simple question. Imagine that you were arrested for being a Christian and the authorities brought charges against you. Would they find enough evidence to convict you?

Colossians 2:16-23 Pulling The Weeds Of Legalism Series

Summary: Following a list of rules and regulations will never lead to spiritual vitality. Grace demands that we avoid judging others according to our standards.

Pulling the Weeds of Legalism

Almost every state in our nation still has laws on their books that would surprise most people. For instance,

- In Florida, a woman may be fined for falling asleep under a hair dryer.
- In Indiana, citizens are not allowed to attend a movie house or ride in a public streetcar within four hours after eating garlic. That seems like a good law.
- And, a little closer to home in Illinois...
- In Eureka, a man with a moustache may not kiss a woman.
- In Moline, ice-skating at the Riverside pond during the months of June and August is strictly prohibited.
- In Normal, it's against the law to make a face at a dog.
- I also checked the statutes in my home state of Wisconsin and discovered that in the Dairy State...
- At one time, in an effort to help the sale of butter, margarine was considered illegal, especially when smuggled in by the "flat-landers" of Illinois.
- It's against the law to serve apple pie in public restaurants unless there is cheese on top of it.
- And, it's probably a good thing that I'm not a pastor in Nicholas County, West Virginia because no member of the clergy there is allowed to tell jokes or humorous stories from the pulpit. Or, maybe that wouldn't apply to the humor I use...

We may laugh, or groan, at these out-of-date laws, because many of them seem absurd and ridiculous. But, if we were to list all the rules, expectations, and laws that are on the books in many churches today, chances are we'd stop laughing pretty quickly. Most of these religious regulations are not written down anywhere but many of us either attempt to keep them, or expect others to do so.

Last week, we learned that we're not to just focus on our conversion. Instead, we're called to demonstrate our commitment to Christ on a daily basis by going deeper with Him. Our knowing should lead to growing.

This growth can be stunted, or even choked to death by the weeds of legalism. Legalism can be defined as a strict adherence to the law. Specifically, as it relates to faith, a legalist is one who believes that performance is the way to gain favor with God. Legalism is the human attempt to gain salvation or prove our spirituality by outward conformity to a list of religious "do's" and "don'ts." It's often disguised in Christian terms and behavior.

Observations

Before we jump into our text this morning, allow me to make some observations about legalism.

1. We tend to think others are legalistic, but that we're not. The fact is that we're all legalistic by nature. We tend to judge others by our own standards of what is acceptable and what isn't. In essence, we think our sins smell better than other people's. As I've said before, we have very little tolerance for people who sin differently than we do.
2. Legalism is highly contagious. While it's usually less conscious and systematized in our minds than it was among the Pharisees, legalism can spread like a bad virus through an entire congregation. That's why Jesus reserved some of his harshest criticism for legalistic list-makers in Mark 7:6-8: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."
3. Legalism can take a vibrant faith and make it dull and lifeless. It can evaporate enthusiasm, jettison joy, and

stifle spirituality. Instead of finding freedom through Christ, many believers become burdened by the church.

4. Legalism produces large quantities of self-righteousness, judgment and condemnation. It majors in guilt and misguided sacrifice, urging its followers to evaluate their relationship with God on the basis of standards and scores and expects others to do the same. Superficial spirituality short-circuits the work of grace.

5. Legalism makes us narrow and divisive. The legalist insists that everyone live up to the standard they have adopted. In other words, everyone needs to be like me. When we think this way, we miss the delight of diversity in the church.

6. Legalism makes it impossible for people to see Jesus. There is nothing that pushes a seeker away faster than a list of rules and regulations. We inadvertently portray Jesus as a drill sergeant instead of the Savior.

Most of us fall into legalism without trying to do so. Let me illustrate. Last Sunday, during the first service, Stella and Hector led us in prayer for the persecuted church. When Stella prayed, she told us she was going to kneel and very graciously invited us to do the same, if we wanted to. Now, let's imagine that as you knelt last Sunday you did so with very good motives. You wanted to focus on Christ and intercede for the needs of beleaguered believers around the world. But then you took a peek and noticed that only about half of the people were on their knees. A seed of judgment began to germinate, as you wondered why others weren't doing what you were doing.

Then, because you found kneeling to be so helpful, you began kneeling during your quiet times and during family devotions. When you came to church today and noticed that no one but you knelt during prayer, you felt angry but also strangely smug because at least you were doing what everyone else should be doing.

Do you see how subtle and sneaky legalism is? Its weeds are under the surface in each of our lives. Kneeling to pray is a good thing but it can easily become the standard by which we judge other people's spirituality. In short, if we're not careful we'll default to a performance-based discipleship.

That's exactly what was starting to happen in the church at Colosse. The New Testament books of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews also lampoon legalism. We must be taught over and over that everything is by grace. We're saved by grace and we grow by grace. In our text for this morning, Paul argues that if we want to pull the weeds of legalism, we must focus on two truths...

- Remember our legal standing (Colossians 2:9-15).
- Resist the lures of legalism (Colossians 2:16-23).

Remember Our Legal Standing

The best defense against a performance-based faith is to remember our legal standing before God. If we understand God's divine decree as a result of what Jesus has done on our behalf, we'll experience amazing grace and live with the freedom that is ours in Christ. As Jesus said in John 8:36, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

At conversion, God issues four rulings, or decrees.

1. We are complete (Col 2:9-10).

Let's look at Colossians 2:9-11: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority." The phrase, "in Christ" shows us that Jesus is the center of God's saving activity. When we put our faith in Christ, we are included in what He has done. All the fullness of deity lives in Him. As we've already established in Colossians, if you want to know what God is like, then look at Jesus. The phrase, "lives in bodily form," means to "dwell permanently." Jesus is not just a way to God; He is the only way because He is God Himself.

Listen carefully. Not only does all the fullness of God dwell in Christ, all believers are filled with the fullness of Christ. The tense of this verb in Greek indicates that this fullness is a permanent experience. One translation puts it this way: "And you are in Him, having been completely filled full with the present result that you are in a state of fullness." If you have put your faith in Christ for forgiveness of sins, then there is nothing lacking in your relationship with God. There's not some extra blessing or another experience you need to have.

You have everything you need if you have Christ because the fullness of God comes into your life when you receive Jesus. Friend, you do not need anything more than you already have! You merely need to understand and appropriate that which you've already been given.

2. We are alive (Col 2:11-13a).

One of the many good reasons to preach through an entire book of the Bible is that it forces me to address subjects that might not normally come up in a conversation. I'm thankful for the insights I received from Warren Wiersbe's commentary on this passage (Victor Books: The Bible Exposition Commentary).

Verses 11-13a establish some parallels between circumcision and our new life with Christ. Let's read it: "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ."

God initiated circumcision in the Old Testament as part of His covenant with His people in order to set them apart and identify them as true followers. One of the problems at Colosse was that some legalists were demanding that Christians submit to circumcision and obey the Old Testament Law. These false teachers were a bit different than those Paul refuted in Galatians. In that context, they were insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation. In the church at Colosse, the false teachers were suggesting that obedience to Old Testament regulations would help them become more spiritual.

Though circumcision was a physical procedure, it had some sacred significance. The trouble was that Old Covenant followers insisted on the physical act without emphasizing a change of heart. It had become a religious ritual. That's why Jeremiah 4:4 states that believers were to circumcise their hearts. Physical acts are never meant to be the substance of our faith. Instead, a spiritual change on the inside, accomplished only through the redemptive work of Christ, is what God demands.

When we put our faith in Christ, Jesus spiritually circumcises, or cuts away, our sinful nature in order to prove that we belong to Him. Since we are alive, and no longer dead in our sins, Paul next uses the illustration of baptism. The word baptize has both a literal and figurative meaning. The literal meaning is "to dip, or immerse." That's what we witnessed last Sunday afternoon when six believers were baptized by immersion. The figurative meaning is "to be identified with."

It's important to keep in mind that just as the physical act of circumcision did nothing to change someone's heart, so too, the waters of baptism itself do not save anyone. When we place our faith in Christ and are born again, 1 Corinthians 12:13 states very clearly that we are "baptized," or "identified" with Christ: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body-whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free-and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

Water baptism is a wonderful picture of an inner reality. When we go under the water, we are symbolizing our burial with Christ, and when we come up, we become a picture of what it means to be raised with Christ. The Greek words are very expressive in verse 12. We are co-buried, co-raised, and co-made alive. We died with him, we are raised with him, and we have life because of him. Baptism vividly portrays the death and burial of the believer's sinful way of life. When Christ died, our old nature died with Him. That's our spiritual circumcision. When we come up out of the water in baptism, we symbolize that just as Christ was raised from the dead, so too, we will be raised to resurrection life.

Remembering that our old sinful nature is dead and buried with Christ gives us a powerful motive to resist sin. We can keep sinful desires from controlling us by treating them as if they are dead. Romans 6:11-14 provides a practical gameplan to use in order to live with the freedom that Christ has promised us: "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace."

3. Our sins are canceled (Col 2:13b-14).

Look now at the last part of Col 2:13 and Col 2:14. Here we see that we're not only complete and alive, but our sins have been canceled: "He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross."

Notice that Jesus forgave "all" of our sins. That means every single one, even those that you have a hard time forgiving yourself for. The "written code" is the Law. Jesus not only took our sins to the cross, He also took the Law and nailed it there, forever out of the way. The Law was against us and stood opposed to us because all it could ever do was point out our sinfulness. In Romans 7:7, Paul concludes that he "would not have known what sin was except through the law."

The written code was like a handwritten ledger of our trespasses against the law. In Bible times, records were often kept on parchment, and the writing could be washed off. Paul is saying that our sins have been wiped away. Our rap sheet has been canceled. All of God's legal requirements have been taken away once they were nailed to the cross. No regulations or man-made rituals have power over us.

4. We have victory (Col 2:15).

We have completeness in Christ, we have new life, and we have been completely forgiven. Our legal standing involves one more thing: we have victory. Col 2:15 is a wonderful picture of Christ's triumph over evil: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." The word for "disarmed" is literally "stripped," as in stripping a defeated enemy of armor on the battlefield.

The powers and authorities of this evil world stripped Christ of his clothing and popularity, made a public spectacle of him on the cross, and thought they had triumphed over him by putting Him to death. Little did they know that the victory actually belonged to Jesus. Friends, evil no longer has any power over you because Christ has stripped Satan's weapons from him. He is disarmed. The only power he has is what we give him when we allow him to deceive us and create fear in our lives.

The cultural background to this verse is rich with meaning. When the Romans went off to fight their enemies, after winning the war, they would bind their vanquished foes together by the hands and march them single file back to Rome where they would have a huge celebration. Thousands of Romans would line the streets to watch this "public spectacle."

At the front of the parade would be the conquering General. Following him would be those soldiers who had acted heroically in battle. The rest of the army would follow. And then at the rear of the procession would be all those who had been conquered. As they would march past the crowds, the people would jeer at them, cast insults, and even throw things. You didn't want to be the main attraction at one of these public spectacles!

Jesus has turned his captors into captives, displaying them in His victory celebration. The Colossians had participated in that victory, and so have we. We don't have to follow false teachers and we don't have to succumb to sin or fear Satan. Jesus is the victor and He has triumphed at the cross. 1 Corinthians 15:54-57: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Resist the Lures of Legalism

The best way to pull the weeds of legalism is to remember our legal position before God we are complete, alive, forgiven, and we have the victory. In this next section, which we will cover rather quickly, we'll see that we must also resist the lures of legalism. I love how the Philips translation renders Galatians 3:2-3: "I shall ask you one simple question: Did you receive the Spirit of God by trying to keep the Law or by believing the message of the Gospel? Surely you can't be so idiotic as to think that a man begins his spiritual life in the Spirit and then completes it by reverting to outward observances!" Colossians 2:16-23 gives us three warnings so that we can avoid being idiotic. We must be vigilant or we'll lean toward legalism on a daily basis.

1. Refuse to judge by externals (Col 2:16-17).

Look at Col 2:16-17: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Whenever you see the word "therefore" in the Bible you should always ask what it's there for. Paul is drawing a conclusion based upon what he has just written previously. Since Jesus has done what was necessary for our salvation, don't let other people evaluate your spiritual life by their external standards.

Food restrictions, special diets, observance of ceremonies and holy days rose out of specific practices in the Old Testament. Religious festivals were annual, New Moon celebrations were monthly, and the Sabbath was weekly. Since Christ has now come, special diets and obligatory days are no longer necessary because every Old Testament feast looks forward to Christ. They were just shadows of the reality that is fulfilled in Jesus. Hebrews 10:1 puts it succinctly: "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-not the realities themselves."

It's relatively easy to judge by externals. If there's something you're not supposed to eat and you avoid it, then everything's kosher (no pun intended). If you attend when you're supposed to attend, then you must be doing OK. If you kneel when you pray, then you must be close to God. We must be alert to make sure we're not evaluating what we're doing, or what others are doing, according to external standards.

2. Reject false authority (Col 2:18-19).

Look at Col 2:18-19: "Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow."

The word, “disqualify” means “to declare unworthy of a prize.” It’s the idea of an umpire who is calling you out because you have not obeyed the rules. Paul describes these people in four ways:

1. They have a false humility. They present themselves as humble and holy but in reality they are filled with spiritual pride and superiority.
2. They worship angels. Their focus is on other spiritual beings rather than on Christ.
3. They have seen visions. They love to give people the “latest word from the Lord.”
4. They are puffed up with idle notions. Their “inner secrets” gave them big heads but not burning hearts.

As a result, because of their subjective bias and experiential expressions, they had actually become disconnected from the head. They were severed from any hope of spiritual vitality because they were not getting their orders from Christ. We must make sure we are not seeking experiences that do not correlate with Christ. Even though there is a fascination with “religious mysticism,” our focus is to be on Jesus.

I’ll never forget a conversation Beth and I had with a fellow American Christian when we lived in Mexico. We were telling her that we missed Christian radio and bookstores. Before we could finish explaining how difficult it was to be involved in church planting and not have all the resources that are available in the States, she told us that she didn’t miss it at all! She went on to describe how she could just focus on her Bible without feeling like if she hadn’t read the latest book, or attended the latest seminar, that she was somehow less spiritual than those who had. I’ve often thought about that. As good as books, seminars, and tapes are, and I take full advantage of them, we must come back to the cry of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura! That means that the Bible alone is the standard and measurement for everything else.

3. Repudiate religious rules (Col 2:20-23).

Let’s refuse to judge by externals and reject false authority. Finally, if we want to pull the weeds of legalism, we must also repudiate religious rules. Drop down to Col 2:20-23: “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

The false teachers focused on personal denial as the way to curb their appetites. This sounds really good on the surface because we all agree that we need discipline in our lives. But they were teaching that these disciplines were necessary for fellowship with God.

According to church history, Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism, never changed his vest or washed his feet. He was outdone, however, by Simon Stylites, who spent the last 36 years of his life on top of a fifty-foot pillar. He mistakenly thought that if he withdrew from the world then he would be truly spiritual. We saw similar things in Mexico as we observed people climbing stairs on their bloody knees in order to pay homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Paul tells us that we don’t belong to the world anymore. We don’t get to heaven by following a list of do’s and don’ts. And, we don’t live the Christian life that way either. We cannot earn God’s favor. All we can do is receive it. Charles Spurgeon puts it this way: “I have found, in my own spiritual life, that the more rules I lay down for myself, the more sins I commit.” (“Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers,” p. 235).

Col 2:23 states very clearly that regulations, though they may look and sound good, “Lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” Rules don’t abolish the appetite because they feed the flesh. Why is that? Because no matter how hard we work we can’t force sin out of our lives through devotion to man-made dictates. We need God’s power working within us. It’s His grace, not a regimen of rules and activities that affect real life change.

We must teach grace before commitment, because once grace is understood and embraced, it will lead to commitment. But, required commitment and rule keeping always leads to legalism. Titus 2:11-12: “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.”

Application

- As we close this morning, let me ask you, “What is your Christianity like?”
- Is it focused on yourself or on Christ?
- Are you a list-keeper, or a grace-giver?

- Is your faith anchored to personal experiences or on the Word of God?
- Has it set you free or tied you up?

Rules are like religious training wheels that keep us from tipping over. But they're also confining because they keep us from breaking free. A bishop once said to Louis XI of France, "Make an iron cage for all those who do not think as we do, an iron cage in which the captive can neither lie down nor stand straight up." The king agreed and had it constructed. A short time later, the bishop somehow offended King Louis, and for 14 years he was locked in that same cage.

Friend, have you constructed a cage for those who don't think the same way you do? Be careful, because you may end up in bondage yourself.

Christianity is not a matter of what you do or what you don't do. Christianity is what is done for you. Its not spelled D-O but rather D-O-N-E. When Jesus died on the cross, He said, "It is finished." The price has been paid. The debt has been erased. You are complete in Christ. You are alive. Your sins are forgiven. And you have the victory!

What old laws are still on your books this morning? Are you ready to nail them to the Cross so that you can be set free? Give your list to Jesus right now.

Colossians 3:1-11 Breaking Free From The Past

Summary: As we focus on those things that are eternal, and put on the new self, we will experience freedom from those things that have shackled us in the past.

Breaking Free from the Past

In an old Candid Camera episode, an actor is on a busy sidewalk and begins looking at the ground. He walks around a bit and continues to look down. People are passing by him and a few give him strange looks. After a couple minutes, he decides to get down on his hands and knees and begins feeling around with his hands. People begin to slow down and watch what he's doing. Finally, one person stops and starts looking at the ground. Then another one begins searching the sidewalk.

In a few minutes, the camera shows about a dozen people looking down, some even on their hands and knees! At that point, the actor, who got all this started in the first place, quietly gets up and walks away. No one else notices that he has left. They're so intent in their search that they never even bothered to ask what it was they were looking for.

This is a good picture of how many people live in our society today. They're searching for something because they know there's got to be more to life. But, they'll never find it if they don't know what it is that they're missing. We're going to discover this morning from Colossians 3:1-11 that if you want to break free from your past, then where you put your eyes is very important. Instead of looking down, Paul challenges us to:

- Look up (Col 3:1-4)
- Look out (Col 3:5-9a)
- Look in (Col 3:9b-10)
- Look around (Col 3:11)

As we come to Colossians 3, we move from doctrine to conduct. This is very similar to the outline of the Book of Romans, where the first eleven chapters contain rich truths and the final chapters focus on how to live them out. The same is true of the Book of Ephesians. What we believe determines in large part how we behave.

Specifically, in Colossians, we've learned that if we get Christ right we get everything else right. Jesus is supreme over His creation, His church, and now we'll see in chapters 3 and 4 that He is supreme over the Christian. There are practical implications that should be evident if one surrenders to the supremacy of Jesus. As such, we move from principle to practice, from the indicative to the imperative, from the "is" to the "ought." It does little good if we can declare and defend the truth but fail to demonstrate it in our lives. Let's pray that we're not like those described in Titus 1:16: "They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny Him."

Warren Wiersbe reminds us that the pagan religions of Paul's day taught little or nothing about personal morality: "A worshipper could bow before an idol, put his offering on the altar, and go back to the same old life of sin. What a person believed had no direct relationship with how he behaved." (The Bible Exposition Commentary, page 133). Christianity is much different. Duty is always connected to doctrine.

Paul has been arguing that we are set free from the powers around us, now he tells us that we have been set free for living a life above moral reproach. God's plan is to first make us new; then He challenges us to live as new people. In short, we don't have to be like we've always been. We can break free from the past, if we know where to look.

Look Up!

Instead of gazing at the ground, we must first look up! We see this in Colossians 3:1-4:

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

This opening phrase parallels Colossians 2:20: "Since you died with Christ..." As we learned last week, since we died with Christ, we don't have to follow the rules of a hollow and deceptive philosophy. Colossians 3:1 establishes the truth that since we've been raised with Christ, we have a new status and therefore a new way of life. We now have a power source for living. Believers have died with Christ, been buried with Him, have been raised with Him, and as Ephesians 2:6 states, we have been seated with Him in the heavenly places. This is our position, but we must appropriate these truths on a daily basis in order to break free from the past.

That's why Paul writes, "set your hearts on things above." I'm sure you've heard the phrase, "He's so heavenly minded that he's no earthly good." While I guess that's possible, it's more likely that people today are so worldly minded that they're no heavenly or earthly good. If we truly set our hearts on things above, we will experience power and freedom here on earth. The word "set" means to seek something out with a desire to possess it. The word is in the present tense, which implies that we're to continue to seek the things above. It's not just a one-time decision, but is to be a daily activity.

Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6:21: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." If our focus is on things that will ultimately rust, tarnish, break down, or burn up, our energy and emotions will be misplaced. If we seek out Christ and allow Him to become our ultimate treasure, our hearts will follow.

Knowing that "Christ is seated at the right hand of God" provides a much-needed reminder that Jesus is supreme and in control. This phrase echoes Psalm 110:1, which is the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament: "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" Jesus is exalted and sits at the right hand of the Father, which shows that His redemptive work is now complete. The false teachers stressed "heavenly things" also, but Paul was appealing to the highest power of all, Jesus Christ.

The first imperative is to "set our hearts on things above." The second is to "set our minds on things above, not on earthly things." This literally translates, "Keep on thinking, as a matter of habit, on things above, not on things on the earth."

Our feet must be on earth, but our minds must be in heaven. Thoughts can influence actions, so if we place our thoughts above and not on the earth, our behavior will reflect those things that matter to God. This requires tenacious effort on our part because we tend to look down by nature, instead of looking up. But if we fix our gaze on things above, God will change our desires. If we change our mind, God will change our heart.

We need to put our brain in gear by focusing on those things that are spelled out in Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things." By seeking what Christ desires, we have the power to break our obsession with pleasure and the accumulation of things.

In Col 3:3-4, we're given five reasons to look up.

1. We've died (Col 3:3a).

This looks back to the cross where we died positionally in Christ. As a result, we have no obligation to live like we used to live. Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Because we've died with Christ, we should have as little desire for improper worldly pleasures as a dead person would have. We don't just receive a cosmetic makeover or simply add a Christian veneer that only laminates our life. Our old nature is not renewed or even reformed; instead, it is put to death.

2. Our life is hidden with Christ (Col 3:3b).

To have our lives hidden with the One who is seated at the right hand of God gives us both security and satisfaction. The image here is treasure that is stored away in a secure place. Like a seed buried in the earth, our real lives are hidden from the world, only to be revealed when Christ returns. Our new life is a mystery or secret to those who don't understand spiritual matters. 1 Corinthians 2:14:

"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

3. Christ is our life (Col 3:4a).

In a very real sense for the believer, Christ is what life is all about. Without Him we would be dead in our sins. In John 14:6, Jesus said about himself: "I am the way, the truth, and the life..." By realizing that Christ is our life, we can have a new attitude about anything that happens to us. If He is truly our life, we have nothing to fear.

4. Christ will come again (Col 3:4b).

Since Jesus is coming again, it only makes sense that we should be looking up on a continuous basis. The phrase, "when" is better translated, "whenever Christ appears." The fact of His return is certain but the time is indefinite. Since we don't know the when, we must keep watching.

5. We will appear with Him in Glory (Col 3:4c).

The verb, "appear" means "to make visible what is invisible." When Christ returns, the real position of the believer, which has been hidden to the world, will be made known. When Jesus is revealed in His glory, we shall be totally transformed according to 1 John 3:2: "...But we know that when he appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

Paul is urging us to look up and remember who we are now, who we once were, and who we will be when Christ returns. Where are you looking this morning? What does your mind focus on? What gets the attention of your heart? Friends, we must make a conscious, deliberate, and daily decision to look up and set our minds and hearts on heavenly things. Our outlook determines our outcome. Keeping our minds and hearts in the right place will often determine where we end up. That leads to the second point.

Look Out!

Not only must we look up, we must also look out. We see this in Col 3:5-9a: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other..."

Colossians 3:5, in the New Living Translation reads like this: "So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you." Because we have died and been raised with Christ, we have the spiritual power to slay those desires that want to control us. We have died to sin, but we must render sinful desires as powerless. While we can't totally eradicate the sinful nature, we can treat it as a morally impotent force. The new life calls for more than jettisoning a few vices and beefing up our spiritual life by going to church once in a while. We'll talk more about this in verse 10, but what gets renewed is the "new self," not the earthly nature. Positionally, we've died with Christ. Now we need to live it out practically.

Last week we learned that in order to pull the weeds of legalism, we must refuse to judge by externals, we must reject false authority, and we need to repudiate religious rules. But that doesn't mean we can do whatever we want as believers. Grace trumps legalism but Paul makes it very clear in Romans 6:1-2 that we are no longer to let sin rule over us: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

I admire the moral fiber and tenacity of Phinehas in Numbers 25. He's one of my heroes. As we say today, the dude rocks! He was not afraid to deal with sin. Israel was just about to enter the Promised Land after 40 years of hanging out in the desert. Now you would expect to find them really pumped up and excited about being so close. Instead of thanking God, the men of Israel are sleeping with foreign women and worshiping false gods. Needless to say God's anger burned against the Israelites and so he sent a plague among the people.

In the midst of God's judgment, one guy was so brash that he didn't even try to hide his sin. He marched right in front of the people with a Midianite maiden and took her into his tent to sleep with her. Picture the scene. The people of God are weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting because of their sin and the plague that is wiping them out, and this bonehead walks right by them flaunting his sin. By the way, have you ever noticed how sexual sin can cause a normally sane person to do some pretty stupid stuff?

Well, this is where Phinehas enters the scene. When he saw what was going on, he jumped up, grabbed his spear, ran to the man's tent and drove the spear through both the man and the woman as they lay together. The plague immediately stopped, but not before 24,000 people were killed. I love what God says in Numbers 25:11: "Phinehas ...has turned my anger away from the Israelites; for he was as zealous as I am for my honor..." Because Phinehas was looking up, he was also looking out.

Paul wants us to look out so he lists some sensual sins in verse 5. We must slay these with the passion of a Phinehas. Anytime we

see these desires begin to awaken in our lives we need to grab our spear and thrust it right through them. We need to be zealous for God's honor by putting them to death. Notice that we're not just to put them aside. We're not to wound them or even ask them to leave. We're not to experiment or play around with them, rationalize them or even explain them away. Instead, we're to kill them. We're to thrust our spears right through them.

Some of you are not going to like hearing about these sins. Maybe you came to church today to be encouraged with a positive message. Listen carefully. Negative warnings and commands grow out of the positive truths of Christian doctrine. Here's another way to look at it. God loves you too much to allow you to mess up your life with sensual sins. He's not a killjoy. He made you and knows what is best for you. That's why He wants you to live in purity and enjoy sexual expression within the bounds of monogamous marriage.

Did you know that Paul talks about sexual sin more than any other sin? I think there are at least three reasons for this.

1. Sexual sin is different than any other sin.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20: "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." The emphasis we hear today is on "safe sex," but let me tell you that there is no prophylactic for the soul. Sexual sin will take you further than you want to go and cost you more than you want to pay. We need to understand that sexual expression is not just something we do; it reflects who we are.

2. Sexual sin was and is everywhere.

Sex outside of marriage was accepted as the norm in Paul's day and was actually part of many pagan religious rituals. I don't need to tell you how pervasive sex is today because you see it everywhere.

3. Sexual sin destroys people.

Satan knows that he can trip up almost anyone by using sex. David was wiped out for a period of time because of his sin with Bathsheba. Marriages are destroyed on a regular basis because of infidelity. Sex was Samson and Solomon's downfall.

Paul lists the sins that we're to put to death.

1. Sexual immorality. This is a general term and refers to any form of illicit sexual behavior. We derive our word "pornography" from this Greek word.
2. Impurity. This is marked by a mind that is filled with sensually suggestive thoughts that reads sex into even the most wholesome of situations.
3. Lust. Lust seeks quick fulfillment and always wants more. Love takes work and deepens over time. Lust focuses only on the senses, but love uses the senses to cherish the other and to nourish the soul.
4. Evil desires. Our physical desires are divinely given but they become evil when they are motivated by the sinful nature and are executed for evil ends. Since desires lead to deeds, we must purify our minds and hearts.
5. Greed, which is idolatry. This is the sin of always wanting more. In this context, it may apply to the greed for satisfying evil desires and for sexual immorality. The person who is never satisfied with what he has is usually envious of what others have. This leads to idolatry, when things and people end up taking the place of God.

In Col 3:6, Paul states that because of these things, the wrath of God is coming. In this context, first of all, it could refer to the judgment of God that we bring on ourselves according to the principle found in Galatians 6:7: "A man sows what he reaps" and what we see in Romans 1:24 where we read that "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts..." Secondly, this wrath is "coming." Presently, it abides on all who have not trusted Christ and are designated as "children of wrath" in Ephesians 2:3. If a person does not come to saving faith before they die, they will experience the righteous wrath of a holy God.

Friend, if you're involved in immorality, you need to follow two dictums:

Don't do it! Stop right now. Confess it to God and to whomever you are wronging.

Don't view it! Be careful about what you put into your mind. Get rid of pornography. Get a web blocker. Watch what you watch on TV and in movies.

The Bible is clear in its teaching on this topic and can be summarized this way: Abstinence for the single, and monogamy for the married.

God's wrath is balanced within His holiness by mercy, compassion and love. He is repulsed by sin and yet is committed to us in love. Jesus will give you grace but He also tells the truth about your sin because He is the perfect embodiment of both grace and truth.

Just as He told the woman caught in adultery to “go now and leave your life of sin,” so too, He calls us to look out and stop what we’re doing so that we can follow Him completely.

Col 3:7 reminds us that this kind of behavior belongs to our old life and should not be part of our present pattern of living: “You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.” We need to put the past behind us and refuse to resort to a lifestyle that no longer reflects our true identity. In verse 8-9a, we’re told to rid ourselves of social sins. By the way, we often dismiss these sins as the “little ones” that we can overlook. Paul doesn’t. If you thought you cruised safely through the first list, you better fasten your seat belts.

The image here is that of taking off old smelly clothes. When my dad would take care of us kids growing up, he prided himself on never having to change a dirty diaper. When asked how he accomplished this feat, he would grin and say, “Oh, it’s actually pretty easy. I would just put on a clean one right over the dirty one!” That probably explains why I am the way I am today.

Before we can put on the new, we must first take off the old. The verb “rid” calls for immediate, decisive resolution. Before new garments of righteousness can be put on, the old rags of sin must be discarded.

- Anger is a continuous attitude of hatred that remains bottled up within.
- Rage is what comes bursting out, often uncontrollably.
- Malice is an attitude of ill will towards a person. It’s often a hidden hatred of the heart that takes revenge in secret.
- Slander is when we destroy another person’s good reputation by lies, gossip and the spreading of rumors.
- Filthy language is crude talk or abrasive words and is often filled with swearing and sexual innuendo.
- Lying to one another disrupts unity by destroying trust. It tears down relationships and can lead to serious conflicts.

These behaviors have no place in any Christian or in any church. They are part of the old life, the “dirty diaper,” if you will. We must resolutely “rid” ourselves of the repulsive sins of sex and speech so that we can “put on” the attitudes and actions of Christ.

Look In

After looking up and looking out, if we’re serious about breaking free from the past, we must also look in. We do this by recognizing the truth about what happened at conversion. Look at the last part of Col 3:9 and Col 3:10: “...Since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

We’ll pick this up in greater detail next week but I want you to notice that “you have taken off your old self” and “you have put on the new self.” This is not a command to keep but a truth to claim. It’s already been done. We are exhorted to stop doing certain things because we can stop. We are different therefore we can act differently. As we look in, we realize that we are no longer what we once were.

The new self has been put on and yet it is “being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” We are created in the image of God but because of our sin, that image has been defaced. God’s purpose is to restore His image in us. Warren Wiersbe puts it this way: “We were formed in God’s image, and deformed from God’s image by sin. But through Jesus Christ, we can be transformed into God’s image once again.” This is where we take the responsibility to renew our minds according to Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...”

Look Around

That leads to the fourth aspect of breaking free from the past: we must look around and see others as Christ does. Notice verse 11: “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” The word “here” indicates that in Christ there should be no barriers of nationality, race, education, social standing, wealth, gender, religion, or power. The gospel breaks down walls of ancient prejudice. Paul lists four groupings that need to dissolve in the church.

- Racial distinctions. The spread of the Greek culture could make a Greek person feel proud and privileged and therefore look down on Jews. A Jewish person would regard Gentiles as heathen and immoral, and outside of God’s grace.
- Religious distinctions. The false teachers taught that circumcision was important to the spiritual life but Paul made it clear that this act of surgery gave one no advantages in Christ.
- Cultural distinctions. The Greeks considered any non-Greek to be a barbarian and the Scythians were the lowest barbarians of all and were considered little better than beasts.
- Economic distinctions. There was a huge cultural and economic chasm between slaves and those who were free.

All of these human barriers belong to the “old man” and not the new one. Friends, since Christ dwell in all believers, regardless of background or social status, we must make sure we are not allowing any division or prejudice to take root in our lives. The stigma of being different must be loved away as we strive for unity within diversity. Christ is all and is in all.

Stop looking down. And stop searching for something that will never satisfy. Instead, seek Christ by looking up...and live Christ by looking out, looking in, and looking around.

Colossians 3:18-4:18 Making Your Relationships Work

Summary: As Christ-followers, we have the responsibility to prioritize our family relationships by submitting, loving, obeying, and encouraging. We must also give attention to our jobs by working hard and by being fair.

Making Your Relationships Work

During the rehearsal for her wedding a nervous bride was having a difficult time remembering all the details. Her kind pastor took her aside at the end of the night and said, "When you enter the church tomorrow, you will be walking down the same aisle you've walked down many times before. Concentrate on the aisle. And when you get halfway down the aisle, concentrate on the altar. And, when you reach the end of the aisle, your groom will be waiting for you. Concentrate on him. Focus on the aisle, then look at the altar, and finally, lock eyes with your man. That's all you have to do."

That seemed to help a lot, and on the day of the wedding, the beautiful but nervous bride walked flawlessly down the aisle. But people were a bit taken aback as they heard her repeating these words during the processional, "Aisle, alter, him. Aisle, alter, him. I'll alter him."

I'm not sure how much success she had at changing her spouse, but there were probably a number of wives wishing her well that day. As we approach our topic for this morning we come face-to-face with the reality that if we're serious about following Christ, He will alter our lives.

Follow along as I read Colossians 3:18-4:1: "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven."

Observations

Before we jump into this practical passage, allow me to make some observations.

1. Our faith must come home with us.

The true test of our relationship with Christ is how we relate to others. Or to say it another way, the home is the first place we test our newness in Christ as "God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved." The virtues that Pastor Jeff preached about last week in Col 3:12-15 must be fleshed out in our relationships. If Jesus is supreme in your life, then it should show in how you relate to the members of your family. The followers of the Colossian heresy believed that true spirituality involved mysticism and esoteric knowledge. Paul shows that faith must be lived out in the family. Jesus is referred to as "Lord" or "Master" seven times in these verses because His lordship finds conclusive expression in the day-by-day, routine relationships of life.

2. The issue is function, not inferiority.

As we learned in Colossians 3:11, cultural, racial, and even gender distinctions are no longer obstacles when it comes to salvation. Everyone is equal in Christ regardless of status. Having said that, individuals have a role to play in the family. We're all disciples of Christ with different responsibilities in our discipleship. For instance, the husband and wife are personal equals before God, but they each have different roles for functional purposes. The same is true for children and parents. This divine chain is meant to help the family run the most efficiently and effectively.

3. Relationships are meant to be reciprocal.

The instructions in our text show a special concern for those who were looked down upon in the first century: wives, children, and slaves. It's striking that Paul would even give them attention since the culture denigrated these three groups of people. Christianity elevated women, valued children, and set things in motion to sabotage slavery. It's also interesting to note that Paul admonishes those in authority as he tells husbands, fathers, and masters to be loving, kind, and fair. These pairs are to be studied together because the relationships are reciprocal. We can't talk about the responsibilities of the wife without clarifying the obligations of the

husband.

4. Families need help today.

I won't take the time to quote statistics to prove to you what you already know: the family is under fire and home life is disintegrating. Since the very first institution that God founded was the family, we need to listen and apply what He has to say in the Bible. Just as He created various physical and natural laws by which the universe functions, so too, when God created the family He gave good guidelines and practical parameters to follow. If we ignore them, we do so at our own peril. I pray that you will listen with an open mind this morning in order to see how Christ's supremacy subtly deconstructs old habits of domination and exploitation and replaces them with loving leadership and gracious submission.

Let's begin with the first of the three relationships.

God's Guidelines for Marriage

The Bible views marriage as a partnership, with each partner filling certain roles. Colossians 3:18 begins with the duty of wives: "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." Let me just say that there is probably no biblical teaching more controversial than that of a wife's submission to her husband. Let's clear up a few things in order to understand this more accurately.

- Nowhere does it say that a wife is to obey her husband. Children are to obey in Col 3:20 and slaves are to obey in Col 3:22, but wives are to submit. There's a difference.
- This has application to wives in a marriage relationship, not to women in general.
- Both husbands and wives are to submit to the Lord and to each other. Ephesians 5:21: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

The concept of submission is taught in many places in the Bible and does not mean slavery or imply inferiority. The Greek word means "to arrange one's self under a delegated authority" and comes from the military world where soldiers were to be in order under the direction of their officer. This is similar to what Paul praised the believers for in Colossians 2:5: "...I delight to see how orderly you are..."

In the home, the wife is to submit to the delegated authority of her husband. I recognize that some of you may chafe at this idea. A 1998 Gallup Poll showed that 69% of the public disagreed with the statement that "wives should graciously submit to the servant leadership of their husbands." The fact that a teaching is not popular is no reason to discard it.

The reason for this submission is found at the end of verse 18: "As is fitting in the Lord." Another translation puts it this way: "This is what the Lord has planned for you." A wife is to submit to her husband out of the same allegiance she shows to Christ. This is not a cultural deal but represents God's sense of order in the marital relationship. That's how He set it up at the very beginning as 1 Timothy 2:13 reminds us: "For Adam was formed first, then Eve."

Submission carries the idea of entrusting oneself to the leadership of another to accomplish a task. When a Christian woman is submitted to the Lord and to her own husband, she will experience a release and fulfillment that can come no other way. The end result will be an environment of intimacy, growth and a ministry partnership that will make a difference in the world.

Fellow husbands, before you start gloating and posting this verse on your wife's mirror, it's our turn to take a hit in verse 19: "Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them." Throughout the Bible, God says more about the quality of the husband's leadership than He does about the wife's submission. I personally think that the responsibility for a good marriage is put more on the husband. Bad marriages are usually the result of the husband's inability to love his wife instead of the wife's refusal to be submissive. I've yet to meet a wife who would not be willing to follow the leadership of a man who loves her unconditionally.

The word "husband" originally meant one who holds the house together. Another image is that of a gardener who cultivates the soil and keeps the weeds out. As husbands, our responsibility is to love our wives by holding things together and providing an atmosphere for growth and fruitfulness in our homes.

I heard about a husband who decided to make an appointment with a marriage counselor because his marriage was on rocky ground. His wife was hurt and upset and as she began to talk, she crossed her arms and recounted her loveless life. Tears filled her eyes and her lips started quivering. It wasn't long before the wise counselor realized what the problem was. So without saying a word, he took her by the hands, looked in her eyes for a long time, smiled, and then gave her a big hug.

A change immediately came over her face. She softened and her eyes lit up. Stepping back, the counselor said to her husband, "See, that's all she needs." The husband checked his Daytimer and said, "Great. I'll bring her back to see you every Tuesday and Thursday."

Guys, has it been awhile since you've hugged your wife and taken the time to listen to her? In a parallel passage in Ephesians 5, Paul devoted twice as many words telling husbands to love their wives as he did in telling wives to submit to their husbands. Ephesians 5:25 tells us that we're to love our wives in the same way that Christ loves the church. That means I must love Beth to the point of dying for her.

An amazing demonstration of that kind of sacrifice happened this week in Athens, Georgia. Randy Burris was in his front yard when a young mother walked by with her two-month-old daughter in a stroller. Just then a car screeched around the corner, lost control and headed straight for them. The mother tried to push the stroller into the grass but it got stuck. Burris grabbed the handle from her, ran toward the lawn and was hit in mid-stride. The baby girl and mother are fine but Randy Burris was killed instantly. That's the kind of love that God is challenging husbands to have for their wives. The kind of love that is willing to die for another.

This word is agape, which is the type of love that is based on commitment, not emotions or romance. If you're here this morning and you no longer feel like you're in love with your wife, let me shoot straight with you. It doesn't matter whether you feel love or not. Biblical love is a verb and a command. 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 reminds us that, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

If you don't have the feelings, it doesn't mean that you can take a pass on your responsibility. Act with love, and the emotions will usually follow. A happy marriage does not come automatically because we are naturally self-centered and prideful. It's like the woman who complained to her marriage counselor that when her husband won a trip for two to Hawaii, he went twice!

The last part of Colossians 3:19 challenges husbands to "not be harsh" with their wives. This phrase can also be translated, "Don't become embittered [or resentful] toward her." That means that even if a wife is not perfectly submissive, the husband is not to become resentful. Husbands must prevent a sour attitude from taking root. The only other time this word is used in the New Testament, it refers to something bitter in taste. Paul is telling husbands not to call their wives "honey" and then act like vinegar. As a good gardener who pulls out weeds, the husband must follow the challenge of Hebrews 12:15: "See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

God's Principles for Parenting

Next, Paul addresses the relationship between children and parents in verses 20-21: "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord." Kids have a duty to listen and carry out the instructions of their parents. The verb here is in the present tense, indicating that such action is to be habitual and ongoing. When a child obeys his or her parents in everything, the Lord is pleased. In addition, this 5th Commandment, according to Ephesians 6:3, carries with it a promise: "That it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Obedience brings God's pleasure and comes with God's promise. As such, children must be taught its importance.

In 1 Samuel 15:22-23, God puts rebellion on a par with witchcraft and idolatry. Because of the ramifications of disobedience and the blessings of obedience, parents must take seriously the task of training children to obey. We need to be engaged and encouraging, but we must also expect obedience from our children. That's why Colossians 3:21 gives fathers an awesome responsibility: "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."

In the Old Testament, Joshua was strong in his resolve for his family to serve the Lord (Joshua 24:14-15). Eli, on the other hand, was condemned because of his failure to restrain his sons (1 Samuel 3:11-14). While Paul uses the word "fathers" here to show the strategic role that dads play in parenting, the Greek word certainly includes mothers as well. I think one reason he does specify the role of the father is because dads have a propensity to cause bitterness in their children. In Paul's day, the father was more like a dictator than a "daddy."

Ray Stedman lists three things that fathers do that can lead a child to discouragement. I've added a fourth.

1. Ignore them. A father who has no time for his children soon creates within them a deep-seated resentment. Children in these homes can grow up to feel unloved and unaccepted and may end up looking elsewhere to have their needs met.
2. · Indulge them. These types of fathers give their children everything they want. This is not good because a child who is indulged all the time can become restless, dissatisfied, and spoiled.
3. · Insult them. Some dads like to criticize their kids and even call them names. Sarcasm and ridicule can knock the stuffing out of a child faster than anything else.
4. · Intimidate them. Threats and unfair expectations can file a child's self-esteem and scar him or her for life.

Fellow fathers, we must make it as easy as possible for our kids to obey! The way we treat them has a lot to do with their ability and willingness to fulfill their responsibility in the home. Ephesians 6:4 puts it this way: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children;

instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Here’s a brief inventory that you can use to determine how well you’re doing in this area.

1. Do I believe that my children are not mine but rather a gift from God entrusted to me?
2. Am I partnering with God to enable my children to become the men and women He intends them to be?
3. Do they know how delighted and excited I am about them? Do they feel like I’m on their side?
4. Am I living under the leadership of Christ in my life so that my children will have a model to follow?
5. Am I calling my children to obedience and providing corrective guidance and discipline that is both firm and fair?

God’s Ways in the Workplace

Beginning in Col 3:22, we come to some teaching about slaves and their masters. Most homes had slaves in them, so this fits in the general section of how to live out our faith in the family. The Colossian church no doubt had slaves and owners as members in fact, it was probably the only place in that society that they would get together on the same level, without racial or class distinctions.

Here are a couple background truths to keep in mind.

1. At the time of Paul’s writing, almost 50% of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were slaves. It’s important to know that slavery was not a racial issue in the Roman world like it was in our country many years ago. Slaves were usually those who were defeated militarily.
2. While Paul did not call believers to overturn the institution of slavery, these verses helped to bring about change from the inside. The Roman Empire ultimately lost its commitment to slavery as the gospel penetrated further into the culture and more and more masters and slaves started treating each other like brothers and sisters in Christ.
3. While there are not exact similarities to the workplace, we can apply this passage to our jobs. That may work just fine for some of you because you feel like a slave to your work!

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Take a look at Col 3:22-25 where we can draw some principles to our role as employees:

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism.”

1. Do your best at your job at all times

We’re to work hard not just when the boss is around, but even when he isn’t. Years ago, a missionary was responsible for getting the nationals to do certain jobs. He was frustrated because they were lazy and only worked when he was actually watching them. When he left they would stop their jobs and just sit around. This man had a glass eye and one day when it was irritating him, he took it out and put it on a stump. When he returned, everybody was still working because his “eye” was watching the workers. The missionary was thrilled until one day he came back to find a hat over his eye and all the workers lounging around. That’s what Paul is warning

against here. We should work hard even when the boss is not around.

2. Worship at your work.

That doesn't mean that you hold a worship service at your company. Instead, it means that you work out of reverence for the Lord. Properly understood, your job, no matter what it is, can be an act of worship. Sometimes we get this backward as we look to our jobs to provide us with meaning and significance. Instead of looking for meaning in your career, bring meaning to it as you work in an attitude of worship.

3. Recognize Jesus as your boss.

Since Jesus is your Master, work as His servant in your job. That means that we should never be sloppy or unethical. Since Col 3:17 tells us to do everything in the name of the Lord, we must work for our bosses "as if" for the Lord. Col 3:22: "reverence for the Lord." Col 3:23: "...as working for the Lord, not for men." Col 3:24: "...you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving." Your employer may pay your salary, but it is the Lord for whom you are working.

4. Work for a "raise" in the next life.

Col 3:24 tells us that when we do our best, when we worship at our work, and when we recognize Jesus as our boss, we will receive eternal compensation and a benefit package that is out of this world. Verse 25 reminds us that our behavior, whether good or bad, will lead to a "payday" in the next life.

Colossians 4:1 provides a challenge for employers as well: "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven." Masters are not free to set their own standards on how to treat their slaves; rather they must do so with what is right and fair. It was revolutionary of Paul to tell masters to care about their treatment of slaves. If slave owners were to treat their slaves with integrity, then bosses today must also. If you have people working for you, it's important to deal fairly with them, just as God himself treats you.

Action Steps

In order to make our relationships work, we must work at them. Let me give you some practical steps you can take.

1. Marriage. If your marital relationship is a bit rocky, remember this: if one spouse is willing to change, the marriage can change. Wives, you don't have to wait for your husband to be more loving before you submit to him. In fact, as you respect him and affirm his significance, his love may start flowing. Likewise, husbands don't have to hold out on love until they see their wives act more submissive. When you determine to love your wife as Christ loves the church, you will make it much easier for your wife to submit to your loving leadership.

· **Wives:** Tell your husband today that with God's help you are going to follow his lead. If you can think of one thing that you've been holding out on, then mention it to him.

· **Husbands:** Think of one thing you can do today to put your love into action, even if you don't feel like doing it. If you have any bitterness toward your wife, confess it to her.

2. Family. Determine today to take the steps you need to take, whether you are a parent or a child.

· **Children:** Practice first-time obedience. When your parent asks you to do something, or tells you not to do something, say something like this: "Yes, mom I will obey." Instead of pouting or yelling, honor God and your parents by obeying.

· **Parents:** Ask your children this week what one thing you've been doing that causes them to be exasperated. Get alone with each child in order to reaffirm your love.

3. Work. It's not too late to bring Jesus to work with you.

· **Employees:** Try to picture Jesus as your boss this week. Think through how your work will be different with Him behind the desk of your supervisor.

· **Employers:** Pray for your employees by name every day this week. At the end of the week ask each one if they think you are treating them fairly.

Conclusion

Everything we do in marriage, in the family, and in the workplace must be done in recognition that we have a Master over us. As such our attitude should always be to please Him, whether through submitting or loving, obeying or encouraging, working or supervising. Our master will reward us for our service to Him. We come back to the Colossian question: Is Jesus supreme in your

life? If He is, then He will alter you if you allow Him to.

Colossians 4:2-6 Knowing What To Pray For

Summary: Sometimes it's difficult to know how to pray and what to pray for. Paul challenges us to pray with devotion so that the gospel message will go out clearly as we give out grace to those who do not yet know Christ.

Knowing What to Pray For

Many of us have been on a trip together. As you look around this room it may not seem like it, but we've been fellow passengers and on several occasions, I've served as your tour guide. Our trips have not always been pleasant, but most have been memorable. In fact, at the very mention of a return visit, most of us cringe inside. The names for our excursions have not been something appealing like "Comfort Cruises" or "Glorious Getaways." Instead, they're known simply as "Guilt Trips."

Some of us have been taking these kinds of trips for a very long time. And, sadly enough, many of our journeys of guilt have been launched in the church. As we near the conclusion of our study in the Book of Colossians, my goal this morning is not to heap more guilt on you but to send you off on an expedition of grace.

Please turn in your Bibles to Colossians 4:2-6 as I read: "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Our text falls naturally into two parts.

1. · Prayer: Speaking to God about people (Colossians 4:2-4)
2. · Evangelism: Speaking to people about God (Colossians 4:5-6)

Now, before you shut down and take your mental guilt trip at the mention of prayer and evangelism, let's allow the Holy Spirit to blow freshness through this passage. We've all heard messages on the need to pray and the need to witness and yet most of us struggle because we know we're not doing enough. We know that prayer makes a difference, that we have access to the God of the universe, that we can have peace as we pray, and that without prayer, we are powerless. And yet, most of us don't pray like we should.

Even though I love to pray, I find that there is nothing that my flesh resists quite as much as being still and seeking the Lord. Though communion with the Lord is life's greatest pleasure, I often neglect it as if it were not even a priority. Prayer is at once the sweetest privilege we will ever enjoy on earth, and also the severest struggle we will endure.

In one sense, prayer is simple; but yet, it is also the most difficult part of the Christian life. Ask any believer about their battles, and nine out of ten will tell you that maintaining a warm and deepening prayer life is one of their greatest challenges. Because so many have struggled for so long, it's tempting to not pray at all. But then we feel guilty for not trying harder to cultivate a life of prayer.

I can think of several obstacles to prayer.

- We may not yet have a true relationship with God. In order to experience the joy of answered prayer, it's essential that you are able to call God your Father. You can do that only if you've received Jesus Christ into your life.
- We may be more focused on asking for things than on knowing God more intimately. James 4:3 tells us that sometimes we don't receive because we're asking with wrong motives.
- We're too proud. If the truth were known, some of us don't really feel like we need any help. James 4:6: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."
- We view prayer as a chore. When we see something as a "have to" we often fight against it. Most of us know through experience that guilt trips are usually dead ends because guilt is a lousy motivator. Only grace can truly bring us to our knees.

Speaking to God About Others

Let's look first at how to speak to God about others. Colossians 4:2 answers the question, "How do we pray?" We discover three

helpful guidelines in this verse: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”

1. Pray with devotion.

The word, “devote” means to “adhere firmly to.” It implies unrelenting persistence and is the opposite of “hit and miss.” It brings back to mind how steadfast the early church was in Acts 2:42: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” In Luke 18:1, Jesus told his “disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”

Being devoted in prayer is similar to cheering on your sports team, regardless of whether they are winning or losing. That means that when the Packers beat the Bears today you will still root for Chicago next Sunday. Paul is saying something quite simple: Keep praying. Don’t bail. Don’t give up. Be faithful. You may have dry times and days when you don’t know what to say, but keep praying anyway.

To be “devoted” to prayer also means to be “ready at all times.” In Mark 3:9, Jesus told his disciples to get a small boat ready for Him so that the people wouldn’t crush Him. This word “ready” is the same word that is translated, “devoted” in Colossians 4:2. Paul is saying, “Always be ready to break into prayer, and do it instantaneously, at all times.” That’s precisely the admonition in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 where we’re exhorted to “pray continually.”

President George W. Bush is a good example of this. Because he was already devoted to prayer, he was ready to break out into more prayer when the events of September 11th rocked our country. As we “keep at it” on a daily basis we won’t need an introduction to God when some demand or crisis suddenly comes upon us.

Paul doesn’t leave us with just an exhortation. He also gives a couple tips on how to remain devoted in our praying.

2. Pray with watchfulness.

Colossians 4:2 continues by saying that we’re to be “watchful” or awake when we pray. Paul told the believers in 1 Thessalonians 5:6 to not go asleep but to instead be “alert and self-controlled” as the time approaches for the Lord’s return. This exhortation brings to mind the words of Jesus to His disciples the night before He was crucified in Mark 14:34, 38: “Stay here and keep watch...Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” Watchful prayer provides the spiritual fortitude to face down temptation. Because Peter could not stay awake when he was supposed to pray, he gave in to temptation and denied Christ a few hours later.

Consider the difference between two military sentries. One is guarding the Armory here in Pontiac. The other is guarding a platoon in Tora Bora, Afghanistan. Which one is probably going to be more attentive? Which one will be more watchful? The one who realizes he’s in a battle. Friends, because we’re in a spiritual battle, we need to stay on high alert at all times. 1 Peter 5:8 paints a real picture of the war we are in: “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

3. Pray with thankfulness.

We should never pray without thinking of at least one thing to thank God for. Gratitude is a stimulus to prayer. When we see answers to prayer, we will pray more.

He’s given us so many things. We can thank Him for His presence, His provision, His pardon, His promises, and for His purposes. Listen to how Paul puts his own preaching into practice in the Book of Colossians:

- Col 1:3: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.”
- Col 1:12: “Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.”
- Col 2:7: “Rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”
- Col 3:15-17: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

I really enjoy meeting with the group of people who gather every Tuesday afternoon to pray for Pontiac Christian School. I love how we focus on thanking God for what He is doing in the lives of students. We’ll have even more to thank Him for after the outstanding

Christmas program on Friday night. And, as we take time to give thanks, we're motivated to bring even more requests before Him!

Colossians 4:2 asks the question, "How do we pray?" and focuses on the characteristics of prayer. We do so with devotion, watchfulness and thankfulness. Colossians 4:3-4 pose another question, "What do we say when we pray?" Let's take a look: "And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should." There are at least two things we should say when we pray.

1. Ask for open doors.

It's amazing to me that while Paul is under house arrest he doesn't ask for prayers for his release, or for better food, or anything else like that. He simply wants an open door for the gospel message. Even though he was locked up he was able to minister effectively but he needed the prayers of God's people for the doors to open. That reminds me of how God used a prisoner here in Pontiac to share Christ with Lance Evans, his correctional officer. This inmate had an open door with Lance and he took it. I love the picture. A prisoner telling a guard how to find freedom! My guess is that this inmate was praying for an open door, and he probably had others praying with him as well.

In Scripture, a door is an opportunity, or ability. In 1 Corinthians 16:9, Paul says, "a great door for effective work has opened to me." In 2 Corinthians 2:12, he writes,

"I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me." Jesus opens and shuts doors for us as we seek Him in prayer. Revelation 3:8: "See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." God has given Pontiac Bible Church some open doors right now in our children's ministry, youth ministry, and in the women's ministry. By the way, did you know that of the 140 women who attended the Christmas Dinner, almost half of them were guests? Let's pray that these doors stay open and that Jesus opens some more!

This last Tuesday night at our elder meeting we began our time by reading our text for this morning. We then focused our prayers on asking God to give each of us open doors with the lost people in our lives. It brought tears to my eyes to hear these guys pouring out their hearts on behalf of people who don't yet know Christ. I was struck by their passion and amazed at how many people we collectively are praying for.

Paul craved the prayers of people because he knew it would lead to increased opportunities to proclaim the gospel message. Doug and Julie Miller are one of our missionary couples. They live in Pennsylvania and minister with Gospel Furthering Fellowship as they mobilize teams of people to minister in Indonesia. In a recent email, they're asking us to pray that God would give them open doors as they send a gospel video to 50 new homes in their community. This is something that they do every Christmas. Let me quote what they wrote in their letter: "Julie and I want to thank you for praying for us. Many of you have prayed for us for many years. We know that without the prayers of God's people, we could never effectively serve the Lord."

I can open a door for you and you can open a door for me if we pray for one another. 1 Samuel 12:23 is very challenging: "...far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you." That means that if I don't pray for you, and you don't pray for me, we can end up sinning against the Lord.

2. Ask for clarity.

Once God opens a door, it's essential that we have the ability to proclaim the mystery of Christ with clarity. The goal of evangelism is to make the cloudy clear. As we've learned in Colossians, the mystery is that Christ has died for the sins of the whole world, and that when we receive Him by faith, He comes to take up residence in our life as Colossians 1:27 states: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

It's difficult for me to ask people for things but I want to ask you for something this morning. Would you please pray for me? I am cognizant of the fact that I will not have open doors and I will not be able to communicate with clarity unless you are praying for me. If you don't pray for me and I preach a confusing sermon, it's really your fault! Seriously, I can't think of anything more comforting and assuring than to know that many of you are praying for your pastors every day.

If you're not already attending one of our IMPACT classes this quarter, I'd like to invite you to attend the "Partners in Prayer" group. This class will give you practical ways to pray for your own effectiveness and the effectiveness of this church. Would you please pray every day for Pastor Jeff and for me? And if you're able, could you come a little early before the service and join us in the music office as we pray for what takes place on Sunday mornings? You might also want to consider praying during one of our services with the team that meets in the AWANA office.

Speaking to Others About God

When we speak to God about others, Paul urges us to be devoted, to be watchful, and to be thankful. When we wonder what we should say when we pray, we're given two practical requests pray for open doors and pray for clarity when those opportunities

come. As we study Colossians 4:5-6, we'll gain some insight into how to speak to others about God. This is where prayer dovetails with evangelism as we discover that our ability to impact people is directly related to the intensity of our intercession.

Colossians 4:5 focuses on how we walk. In verse 6 the emphasis is on how we talk. We must balance our life and our lips. Let's look first at verse 5: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity."

1. Be wise.

To be wise in the way we walk means that we're careful not to say or do anything that would make it difficult to share the gospel. Often this simply means that we need to remember that those who don't yet know Christ are watching us. When Dr. Will Houghton became pastor of the Baptist Tabernacle in Atlanta, a man in that city hired a private detective to follow him around and report on his conduct. After a few weeks, the detective reported that Dr. Houghton's life matched his preaching. As a result, the man became a Christ follower.

When Jesus sent his disciples out to spread the good news, he told them in Matthew 10:16 to be "as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves." Romans 16:19 challenges us to be "wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." Brothers and sisters, we need to be careful about the way we act because people are making decisions about the validity of Christianity based upon how we're living. When we pray, God will give us open doors. Let's not shut them by our behavior.

2. Make the most of opportunities.

This phrase is a commercial term and means to "buy up." It's the picture of finding something on sale and buying all you can afford because the price is so good. Likewise, we're to buy up every opportunity to speak for Christ when we see one. That's why Pastor Jeff eats lunch at the high school once a week. That's why I asked John Wienshienk, the principal of Pontiac Christian School, to speak at Kiwanis this past Wednesday. He did a fabulous job! In a very compelling way he told his life story and shared the vision of PCS. He then fielded some questions. I asked him a question at the end about how a Jewish guy from New York became a Christian. John shared his testimony naturally and powerfully. He made the most of the opportunity.

Are you making the most of the opportunities you have every day? Try to accomplish as much spiritual good as you can in all your relationships.

3. Be gracious.

Colossians 4:6 challenges us to guard what comes out of our mouths. Our wise walk should lead to wise words: "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." It's important that we communicate with words of grace when we speak with those who don't know Christ. Unfortunately, many times believers go off on people who are living in sin. Or, we let loose about a moral issue in our culture, forgetting that there may be someone listening who is caught in that particular sin. When we're filled with anger and rage people feel judgment, not hope.

We need to be more like Jesus, who was the perfect embodiment of both truth and grace. Even when He dealt with sin, He spoke words of grace. In Luke 4:22+, after listening to Jesus teach, the people "spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips." If you need some help building up your reservoir of grace I encourage you to check out the IMPACT class called, "What's So Amazing About Grace?"

4. Be appetizing.

Our conversations need to be seasoned with salt. Salt enhances flavor and makes food appetizing "Salty speech" in Paul's day referred to witty and clever discussion. It was the opposite of being boring or monotone. When we talk about our faith how can we not be interesting? In our Growth Group right now we've been working on giving our testimonies. One of the common themes in almost all of them is a funny story or interesting comment that peaks the interest of the hearer. Salty speech makes people thirsty for more. We should be talking about Christ in a way that makes someone's mouth water!

Salt was also added to the Old Testament sacrifices in Leviticus 2:13+. Maybe Paul is implying that we should view our words as oral offerings to God, just as our words of praise are spiritual offerings in Hebrews 13:15+. Recognizing that what comes out of our mouths is a sacrifice to God should help us to be both gracious and appetizing.

5. Be ready.

When we choose to mix it up with people who don't yet know Christ we need to be ready to give them an answer when they ask us some questions. Another way to say it is that when we are gracious and appetizing, people will want an explanation. This is a natural process that will happen when people see Christ in us. Peter put it this way in 1 Peter 3:15+: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

We must be ready to answer everyone. You can do that any number of ways. First of all, simply tell your story. Talk about how you became a Christian. Secondly, tell His story. Focus on Jesus, explaining why He had to die on the cross and the need for us to respond to what He has done. Thirdly, invite your searching friends to a Sunday morning service or an event that is specifically designed to be a tool for you to use. That's one reason we're having three services on December 23rd and a service on Christmas Eve at 6:00 p.m.

Cancel Your Guilt Trip

Now, before you leave here feeling beat up because you don't pray enough and you don't say enough, let me encourage you to cancel your guilt trip. The key to praying more and witnessing more is not necessarily to become more disciplined. Discipline is a good thing but my guess is that you've tried that before.

The real answer is to cultivate intimacy with God by bowing to the supremacy of Jesus. We won't really pray until we see prayer as a way to express our love to Christ and recognize that He is even more eager to meet with us than we are to meet with Him. Likewise, it's impossible to salt our speech with the deliciousness of Jesus when we haven't been enjoying the taste ourselves. If evangelism is what spills over when we bump into someone, then we must make sure that what bubbles over is appetizing.

Prayer and evangelism flow out of relationship. Are you growing in your love for Him?

Cancel your reservations on the guilt cruise and book your grace trip.

Colossians 4:7-18 Why We Need Each Other

Summary: God designed us to live in community with others and to work in partnership with one another for the sake of the kingdom. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.

Why We Need Each Other

Two friends were out hunting. As they were walking through the woods, one of them yelled and the other looked up to see a huge grizzly bear charging at them. The first friend started to frantically put on his tennis shoes. When his buddy saw this, he anxiously asked, "What are you doing? Don't you know you can't outrun a grizzly bear?" To which the first guy responded, "I don't have to outrun him. I just have to run faster than you do!"

This morning, as we conclude our study of the Book of Colossians, we're reminded that our faith should affect our friendships. Instead of just looking out for ourselves, we need to recognize that we really do need each other because we're all members of one body. That's not easy to do. As someone has said:

To dwell with saints above
That will be glory;
But to live with saints below,
That's another story.

Please turn in your Bibles to Colossians 4:7-18 and follow along as I read: "Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here.

My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.) Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. Tell Archippus: 'See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.' I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you."

Observations

1. Paul did not operate alone. Paul mentions over 100 people by name in his New Testament letters! In Romans 16 alone, there are 26 people listed. Here, in Colossians 4, he mentions 10 individuals. Paul was definitely not a lone ranger, but functioned as a member of a team. By the way, this should give us incentive to work harder at remembering people's names.
2. Christians have always relied on networks. Paul was a great networker! Without supportive friends and partners throughout the world, the gospel would not have spread as fast as it did. My friend Ray Pritchard is great at this. When he meets someone, he remembers their name and looks for ways to leverage his relationships for the sake of the kingdom. I've tried to learn from him as I communicate on a regular basis with pastors in Chicago, Bloomington, Gridley, Flanagan, and Pontiac. I've also developed ministry partnerships with pastors in other states as they've accessed our church web site, and I try to keep in touch with missionaries around the world.
3. Friendship is part of our discipleship. Our sanctification should extend to all of our relationships. As we live out the supremacy of Christ in our lives, it will affect our interaction with others. In fact, our friends can help us grow. Proverbs 27:17: "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." The church was created to be a community of interdependent people.
4. Friendships develop through shared experiences. Most of Paul's relationships were nurtured in the crucible of ministry partnerships. Some of the best friends you will ever have are those who you meet as you minister together.
5. People are more important than programs. It's important for us to remember that ministry always flows along relational rivers. I've made mistakes when I've put programs above people. If I've ever done that to you, I'm sorry.
6. It's beneficial to have friends who are different from us. Included among Paul's friends are a doctor and a runaway slave. He had friends who were Jewish in background and others who didn't even know who Abraham was. He hung out with guys and had friendships with women. He was closer to some than others, some were givers and a few were goers, several were old and a handful were new, some were up to the task while others bolted from their beliefs.

Five Groups of Friends

Paul was not only a soul winner; he was a great friend-maker. As he closes his letter to the believers at Colosse, he mentions several different groups of friends. As we go through this passage, ask yourself which category you would put yourself in. Or, perhaps more importantly, what type of friend do others think you are?

- · The Faithful
- · The Fervent
- · The Faltering
- · The Fickle
- · The Forgiven

The Faithful

Paul had five faithful friends who lived out the truth of Proverbs 18:24: "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." The first friend Paul mentions is Tychicus in Colossians 4:7-8: "Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts."

As Paul's friend, he had been given three responsibilities.

1. · He was to deliver letters to the Ephesians, to the Colossians, and to Philemon. He was Paul's personal FedEx man!
2. · He would be able to tell people how Paul was doing. As we learned last week, Paul asked the believers to pray that his imprisonment would turn into open doors for the gospel. He didn't mention much about his personal situation because he knew that Tychicus would fill them in once he arrived.
3. · He would encourage their hearts. We all need encouragement don't we? Hebrews 3:13 reminds us that if we're not encouraging one another, we may in fact be contributing to the slippery slide of sin in someone's life: "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." Are you an encourager? Do you build others up, or do your words tear them down?

Paul was confident in giving Tychicus these three jobs because he was faithful. I can think of no higher commendation than what Paul said about his character.

- · He was a “dear brother.” Paul was not afraid to be affectionate in the way he referred to people. Tychicus was loved deeply by Paul.
- · And he was a “faithful minister.” Paul counted on Tychicus on several occasions. Nothing negative about him is ever stated in Scripture. Did you know that the chief virtue of a believer is faithfulness? 1 Corinthians 4:2: “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” God does not ask us be brilliant or beautiful but longs for us to be faithful.
- · He was also a “fellow servant.” Paul didn’t pull rank on people just because he was an apostle. Sometimes we get this mixed up, don’t we? You might refer to Jeff and I as ministers, but actually that can create a false dichotomy. Our job, according to Ephesians 4:12, is to “equip you for the work of ministry.” We’re all ministers and fellow servants. When someone asks you how many ministers we have at PBC you can smile and say, “Oh, about 400.”

Pontiac Bible Church has a lot of people who are faithful just like Tychicus was. When Al Sancken and Pastor Geoff Pfeil announced last spring that they were called to other ministries, faithful people stepped up to the plate at Pontiac Christian School, in worship planning and leading, and in the youth ministry. Things could have gone south but because of the faithfulness of many of you, these ministries actually expanded!

I want to personally thank some people that have been serving as “dear brothers and sisters, faithful ministers, and fellow servants” in our student ministry, particularly last summer and the early fall months. I hesitate listing these names because I don’t want to forget anyone and I don’t want to imply that those of you who are serving in different areas of ministry are somehow less valuable. But, I’m going to take that risk.

Would you please stand when I call your name? Mark and Kelly Thannum, Milt and Michele Hanson and Mike Carlson served as the point people and worked with Chrissy Clayton, Cheri Dicks, Victor Yaccoub, Robin Troyer, Ken and Beth Albrecht, Chuck and Cathy Carroll, Kenny Hinds, Dan Ucherek and Josh Tuley.

The second faithful friend is Aristarchus

Col 4:10: “My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings.” Aristarchus stayed with Paul no matter what the circumstances were. He risked his life during a riot in Ephesus, sailed with Paul to Rome and suffered through a shipwreck. And now he’s a fellow P.O.W. with Paul. Commentators are not sure if Aristarchus was an actual prisoner who was charged with a crime, or if he voluntarily shared Paul’s captivity. I tend to think he willingly served time with Paul in order to encourage and help him. According to Roman law, a respectable prisoner was allowed two slaves to serve as his personal attendants. If this is the case, Aristarchus was an unusual man. I wonder if I would be willing to do that for one of my friends? Do you stay with your friends through the tough times or do you bail on them?

The third faithful friend is Jesus Justus

Col 4:11: “Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings.” The name Jesus was a very popular name in Jewish families. In Hebrew it’s “Joshua” and means “Yahweh is salvation.” Since Christians have always revered the name “Jesus,” he may have taken the Roman name “Justus” after his conversion in order to gain open doors in the Roman Empire. In a similar way, Paul’s name changed from Saul when he was converted. Along with Aristarchus and John Mark, Justus would have been among the first “Jews for Jesus”!

The fourth faithful friend is Luke

Col 4:14 where we read: “Our dear friend, Luke, the doctor.” Dr. Luke played a very important role in Paul’s life, traveling with him on the third missionary journey, and was responsible for writing the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. I’m sure Luke helped to take care of Paul when he received beatings and when he suffered various ailments during his imprisonments. He was well educated and highly trained and was a careful and exact historian. Yet he chose to use his gifts for the kingdom because everything else was secondary to serving Christ. We know that according to 2 Timothy 4:11, Luke stayed with Paul right up until his death when Paul wrote: “Only Luke is with me.” Only a faithful friend will stay to the very end.

Paul’s fifth friend demonstrated her faithfulness by turning her home into a church. Her name is Nympha.

Look at Col 4:15: “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.” It’s not entirely clear whether Nympha was a man or a woman because some versions have a masculine ending, while others have the feminine. I prefer the NIV rendering and believe that this is referring to a woman, much like the businesswoman Lydia in Acts 16:14. Paul wanted to make sure that those traveling to Colosse would give a special greeting to Nympha. Paul recognized her critical role in the kingdom.

Likewise, when you open your home for TLC's or Growth Groups, you are providing a wonderful service. As we've said before, when you meet as a small group in someone's home, you are the church! This building is not the church, you are! I am firmly convinced that before we can get bigger, we must first get smaller. We do that by meeting as the body of Christ in small groups. If you're not in a group yet, I encourage you to make it a priority in 2002.

The Fervent

Paul had five faithful friends. He also had a friend who was a fervent prayer warrior. His name was Epaphras. Take a look at Col 4:12-13: "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis."

We have already met Epaphras in Colossians 1:7. He was the evangelist who first launched the church in Colosse and labored in teaching and shepherding as their first pastor. He is called a "servant of Christ." This word in Greek is better translated, "slave." A slave of Christ recognizes that all of one's possessions, aspirations, and time belong completely to Jesus.

Epaphras was "always wrestling in prayer." His prayers were constant, frequent, and intense. He's a great illustration of Colossians 4:2: "Devote yourselves to prayer..." The verb "wrestling" can be translated, "agonized" and is the same word used for the prayers of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This battle metaphor pictures prayer as a struggle.

Notice that he's praying for the believers in Colosse that they would stand firm against the false teaching and that they would become mature in their faith, having the full assurance of eternal life by grace, not works. Paul can personally vouch for his hard work in prayer as he not only intercedes for the Colossians, but also prays for believers at Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Friends, prayer is hard work. Praying that costs nothing accomplishes nothing. He didn't pray only when it was convenient or when he had nothing else to do. Of the 10 people Paul lists in this chapter, only Epaphras is commended for his fervency in prayer. That doesn't mean that the others didn't pray but it does suggest that prayer was his major interest and ministry. Some of you here this morning are discovering that your primary ministry is prayer. May God bless you and increase your tribe! Keep doing what you're called to do.

The Faltering

A number of us are faithful. A few of us are fervent. And some of us are faltering. This was the case with Archippus in Col 4:17: "Tell Archippus: 'See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.'" Here's another name you don't hear very often! When we compare this verse with Philemon 2, we can conclude that Archippus belonged to the family of Philemon. Some commentators suggest that he was also the pastor of the Colossian church in the absence of Epaphras. For some reason he was neglecting the ministry he had been given, so Paul reminds him to "complete the work." This phrase means to "fulfill it completely."

He may have needed special encouragement to keep at it. Perhaps he was sliding spiritually, feeling tired, or had simply lost his focus. Sometimes we need to be challenged to follow through on what we have committed to. Other times, we need a nudge to get more involved in discerning what ministry the Lord has for us. It reminds me of the Prayer of Jabez that we began the year with from 1 Chronicles 4:10: "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory!"

Are you faltering right now? Have you not been laying it out for Christ like you were at the beginning? If so, make a renewed recommitment to complete the work God has given you to do.

The Fickle

Paul also had at least one friend who we could categorize as fickle. His name was Demas. Check out Col 4:14: "...And Demas sends greetings." We can't tell much about his inconsistencies from this phrase but we can learn more from a couple other passages. It's interesting that Paul gives no commendation about Demas and just simply states that he "sends greetings." It's like Paul is saying, "Oh yeah, and Demas says, what's up?"

In Philemon 24, he is called a "fellow laborer." He was from Thessalonica and was part of the original band of Asian interns who traveled with Paul. Here in Colossians 4:14, he is simply called "Demas." Perhaps Paul is beginning to see the seeds of his fickle faith as he notices the beginnings of the disease called "spiritual drift." 2 Timothy 4:10, written about five years later, tells us what became of him: "For Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica."

A spiritual weakness, or fatal flaw, led to his downfall. His sin was that he was more in love with this world than with the One who made the world. We don't really know what happened, but we all recognize how it can happen. 1 John 2:15-16: "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world-the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does-comes not from the Father but from the world."

We have within us the seeds of a fickle faith because we all have some fatal flaws. It's so easy to maintain a religious veneer and yet be living for the things of the world, isn't it? Do you know what it is that could trip you up? Is there a sin that you seem especially vulnerable to? Are you messing around with anything this morning? Are you trying to serve two masters? Decide today whom you are going to serve so that you don't end up like Demas.

The Forgiven

While Demas tumbled out spiritually, there are two others on Paul's list who made some pretty serious mistakes, and yet were forgiven.

The first forgiven friend is Onesimus. We read about him in verse 9: "...Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother." For a more complete understanding of this forgiven friend, I encourage you to read the Book of Philemon. Onesimus was from the city of Colosse and was a runaway slave. Somehow he had made his way to Rome where he came in contact with Paul and was saved. Even though he had been a believer for only a short period of time, Paul referred to him as a faithful and dear brother.

Christ had forgiven Onesimus and Paul urged him to go back to his master, Philemon, and make things right with him. Philemon was a leader in the Colossian church and so Paul made a beautiful appeal to him in Philemon 12: "I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you." In verse 18, Paul offers to pay for anything that Onesimus has stolen. And he wanted Philemon to not only forgive Onesimus, but to receive him back as a "dear brother." Onesimus was wrong for running away but God forgave him, Paul forgave him, and we assume that Philemon did too.

The second friend who was forgiven was Mark in Col 4:10 where we read that he sends his greetings. Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and was the writer of the Gospel of Mark. Mark's track record was not very good with Paul. When Paul and Barnabas launched their first missionary journey, they took Mark along as an assistant. But, when the going got tough, Mark bailed on them and returned home. Later, when Paul and Barnabas were getting ready to go on their second trip, Paul refused to take Mark with them. This caused so much tension and disagreement between Paul and Barnabas that they decided to split up into two teams so Barnabas could be with Mark.

Evidently, Paul was able to extend grace and offer forgiveness to Mark. He didn't make him wallow in his failures or remind him of his mistakes. In fact, Paul trusted him implicitly and wanted Mark to be with him at the end of his life in 2 Timothy 4:11: "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."

This past Friday I was able to play some basketball at the Rec Center during my lunch hour. Towards the end of our time I decided to pressure one of my friends as he was bringing the ball up the court. I was guarding him like a glove and even did some trash talking as I taunted him, "Come on, and just try to bring the ball up the court. Bring it on, big boy."

Those were my last words because at that very moment he ran me into a blindside pick and I wound up flat on my back, with the wind knocked out of me, and little birdies chirping around my head. As I lay there seeing stars and trying to catch my breath, a couple guys came over and helped me to my feet.

Are you knocked flat this morning? Do you feel like someone knocked the wind out of your sails? You don't have to stay that way. It doesn't matter what your background is or what sin you've committed. Maybe you've run away from something like Onesimus, or maybe you've let someone down like Mark did. If you ask for forgiveness, you can have it. The Christian life is a series of new beginnings. You are not disqualified because of what you've done. Failure happens, but failure need not be final. You can come back to Christ if you want to. You can serve as a forgiven friend because God is the God of the second chance. I hope you see PBC as a place where you don't have to be perfect. We are a church full of forgiven sinners, and a hospital for the hurting.

This also challenges me to make sure I'm not holding someone hostage to something they've said or done in the past. I need to set them free and be willing to give them grace and encouragement just like Barnabas did with Mark. God may be asking you to be a Barnabas to someone today. Do you know anyone who needs a second chance or a third chance or a fourth chance? Are you willing to come alongside and help a teammate get back on his feet?

Closing Thoughts

As we wrap up this message and this series on the supremacy of Christ, what category would you put yourself in? Are you faithful? Fervent? Faltering? Fickle? Or, are you forgiven? If you find yourself to be faltering or fickle, let me draw some practical application points from the final verses of Colossians.

1. Respond to Scripture. In Col 4:16, Paul says, "After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea." We need to remember that Scripture is to be read out loud. It's hard to believe that it was two years ago when we did the Bible Reading Marathon in which we read every verse in the entire Bible over

the course of 90 hours, without any breaks. That was an incredible experience. Paul tells the Colossians to pass the Scripture along to the church at Laodicea as well. Last Christmas Pontiac Bible Church provided the leadership to distribute the Jesus Video to every home in Pontiac, Graymont, and Saunemin. That was another way to get the Word of God out to people.

The letter “from Laodicea” may well have been the Book of Ephesians. Since the New Testament had not yet been assembled, the young churches circulated the different letters among themselves. Just as churches back then needed to respond to Scripture, so do we. That’s why I like to do expository preaching, in which we take a passage of Scripture, or a book of the Bible, and walk through it verse-by-verse. We’re going to focus on the Book of Proverbs in January and then look at the seven shouts from Jesus as He hung on the cross as we lead up to Easter.

Are you responding to Scripture in your life? You might want to simply begin reading a section of Scripture out loud every day. Why don’t you determine in 2002 to read through the entire Bible? Are you passing along the Word of God to others? If you haven’t finished all your Christmas shopping, why don’t you take advantage of the open doors in our country and purchase a Bible for someone in your family?

2. Reflect Jesus. In the first part of Col 4:18 Paul tells his readers that he wrote these closing words in his own hand. It was Paul’s normal practice to dictate his letters to a scribe and then he would include a short note in his own handwriting at the end. These closing comments were often done in a unique style as we see in Galatians 6:11: “See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!” His signature would prove that the letters were genuine. We need to be genuine Christians in large type for people to see. I like the phrase I’ve heard Pastor Jeff use: We need to live out loud for Jesus! Are you reflecting Jesus in an obvious and authentic way to those who don’t yet know Him?

3. Remember those who are suffering. Paul tells the Christians at Colosse in Col 4:18 to “remember my chains.” Paul did not sit down with his laptop in a comfortable office when he wrote these words. You can almost hear the chains clanking on his manacled wrists as he writes. Friends, we often forget how much people suffered in order to bring the Word of God to us. As we learned from Colossians 1:24, when the gospel is carried to the ends of the earth, it is always accompanied with difficulty.

I received an email this week from the Hohulin’s, our missionaries in the Philippines in which they gave an update on the Burnham’s, who have been held as hostages for over six months. Here’s part of what they wrote: “As you go to sleep in your comfortable bed, please remember the Burnham’s who are trying to sleep on the hard ground, chained to their captors.” Let’s remember those who are suffering and let’s prepare to enter into some affliction ourselves as we live out loud.

4. Receive grace. Look at the last part of verse 18: “Grace be with you.” Did you know that every single one of Paul’s letters begins and ends with a word of grace? It’s his trademark. These bookends of grace summarize the entire letter of Colossians. The false teachers elevated legalistic self-effort at the expense of the doctrine of grace. I’m so thankful for grace, aren’t you? We’re going to focus on the “Christmas Collision” of grace and truth on Christmas Eve. I hope you can come. Have you received grace yet?

5. Recommit your life to the supremacy of Jesus I want to close this morning by giving you the opportunity to recommit yourself to Jesus. Do you need to receive grace for the first time or do you need a fresh start? Jesus does not just want to be prominent in your life; He deserves to be preeminent. Is He?

We’re called not to outrun each other, but to run together. We need each other because we can’t make it on our own. And, we need Jesus or our sins will consume us.