

“THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS: I – IT’S ALL ABOUT JESUS”

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Colossians 1

Not too long from now, in a matter of months, a lot of parents will be sending their kids off to college. I’m not a parent, but still I can imagine that there is a certain amount of trepidation that goes along with that. You’ve done the best you could to guide and direct them all their lives, but soon they’ll be on their own, and you want the best for them, and you hope and pray that they are mature enough to make wise decisions – that they’ll choose the right paths to go down. You send them off, and then hope and pray for the best.

In some ways, that must have been what it was like for the leaders of the early church, like the Apostle Paul. They would travel far and wide spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ, starting communities of faith, and then, after spending time with them, setting them up, grooming them, if you will – they would move on to someplace else and start all over again. Oh, it was exciting work – no doubt about it. To see people receive Christ into their lives and see the opportunities and possibilities that a life in Christ brings was incredible, and to see then groups of people become organized into the church – how rewarding that must have been. For Paul and the others to have been able to look in their rear view mirror and see people on fire for Jesus, drawing more and more people into their fold everyday – it had to have been so rewarding.

But then sadly, and too often, after a bit of time had gone by, it was not uncommon that word came to the apostles that things were not going well in these young churches. Such was the case with the young church we’ll be looking at for the next three weeks – the church at Colossae, the Colossians. Colossae was a small city near Laodicea, about a hundred miles from Ephesus in Asia Minor (which is modern-day Turkey).

One of Paul’s disciples, a man named Epaphras, had founded the Colossian church, and for a while it thrived. Everything was working. People were coming to Christ in droves, and they were joining the community of faith, and it was all good. But then, the walls started crumbling down.

Why? Well, external forces were exerting pressure on the Colossians, challenging their beliefs and practices (or lack thereof). You see, these people questioned the supremacy of Christ – oh, they didn’t deny that he was of God, but they also didn’t believe he was one with the Father. On top of that, they told the Colossians they were lacking in the way they did things – that they weren’t ritualistic enough. They were pushing the Colossians to worship angels, to follow

rituals in terms of what they ate or didn't eat, to see Christ as one of many possible pathways to God. As one person wrote about this heresy – “Between God and creation there is a series of intermediate beings rising tier on tier toward the Divine. Salvation is a process of climbing this spiritual ladder from each being to the one higher. Christ (according to these heretics trying to influence the Colossians) is merely one of the intermediaries, rather than the only begotten Son of God. Under this treatment, Christ becomes only half divine rather than ‘the very God of the very God’ of the Nicene Creed. Christ is just a rung on the climb up to the Father.” (Francis Gerald Ensley, *Paul's Letter to Local Churches*, p. 65)

You know, a few years ago, to hear these kinds of things would have alarmed us, but sadly, all of us have seen religious faith go in a thousand different directions of late. People seem to believe what they want to believe, how they want to believe, and make up all sorts of possible paths to knowing God. Sometimes, it seems these days, that anything goes.

But back then, in the days of the early church, this kind of heresy was startling. Epaphras was so upset about what was going on, that he wrote to Paul, who was at the time, in prison. He needed Paul to know how outside forces were trying to control the young church – and he needed Paul's help to right the ship.

So what did Paul do? Actually, what's interesting is what Paul didn't do! Paul didn't come down hard on the Colossians. He didn't start railing against the heretics, he didn't yell at the Colossians for being weak – what Paul did was accentuate the positive. He reminded them in a really beautiful way that it's all about Jesus. Period. He reminded them in this first chapter of Colossians that God had rescued them from darkness through Jesus, that they had been redeemed and forgiven through Jesus, that Jesus was the image of the invisible God, that he was present in creation, that because of Jesus that always had hope and life. In a beautiful way, Paul reminded the Colossians that it was all about Jesus – not about climbing ladders to God, and earning their way to salvation by eating something or not eating something, or following this rule or that. He reminded them of the abiding hope they had in Jesus Christ! It was that simple, and that beautiful.

Oh, that our world today would embrace the powerful, beautiful and simple message of God's love in Jesus Christ. But so many people today are searching in strange ways, and like I said, it seems that “anything goes”. One person whose work I read this week commented on a new church that started somewhere here in Maryland a few years ago, a Christian church mind you, that, in his words, “deliberately de-emphasizes Jesus,” because the founders thought that Jesus has become for many people exclusionary – so they're letting people choose whatever path to God they like. The writer compared what they are doing to what the Colossians were being tempted to do – and that is “minimizing Jesus.”

And it's not just happening in radical ways, but in other, smaller ways as well. I can't tell you the number of churches I've visited in the past few years where they don't say “The Lord's Prayer.” I don't get it, I just don't get it. When I talk to

the pastors about it, they say that they try to avoid language that unchurched people would be uncomfortable with, so they avoid things like “The Lord’s Prayer,” the doxology, and so forth. I don’t know, but I think that’s a slippery slope to travel down – a slope that can lead to “minimizing Jesus.”

Or it’s like going to funerals where Jesus or resurrection is never mentioned. How can a pastor do that? How can you, and why on earth would you not want to lift up the hope that we have in Jesus and eternal life? It’s minimizing Jesus.

I think Paul would say to our world today what he said so beautifully to the Colossians – “Friends, we have this wonderful, wonderful gift – this gift freely given by our loving heavenly Father, the gift of his only-begotten Son, the gift of forgiveness, the gift of life in all its abundance, and the gift of eternal life. There’s nothing you have to do to earn it – it is a gift from the God who created you, who loves you – it’s a gift. It’s that simple, yet it’s profound, and life-changing.

You know, even though you and I may not succumb to the heresies with which the Colossians were being tempted, we, in our own ways, sometimes succumb to thinking we have to earn God’s love in Christ. Even John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, struggled with it. You know, for years I’ve read about Wesley’s conversion experience, but this week, for the first time I read some of his writings of the years before that in his life. He talks about all the things he did trying to be more holy. He constantly read scripture, lead Bible studies, visited in the prisons, but still he wrote, “when, after continuing some years in this course, I apprehended myself to be near death, I could not find that all this gave me any comfort or any assurance of acceptance with God. At this I was then not a little surprised; not imagining I had been all this time building on the sand . . .”

You see, Wesley was trying to earn his way to God. It wasn’t until a night in May of 1738, in a Bible study, that he “saw the light” if you will. He was listening to someone read Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans, and this happened. “About a quarter of nine (Wesley writes), while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” (*Famous Conversions*, Hugh Kerr and John Mulder, editors, p. 59)

Wesley got, in that moment in time, what Paul was trying to get the Colossians to understand – it’s all about Jesus and his grace. It’s not about earning his love, it’s about accepting the gift that He is.

Have you accepted that gift? I hope you have. I hope you know in your heart the pure and simple joy and love of Jesus.

If you don’t, or even if you do, but sometimes get off-track and try and earn your way back, I want to close by giving you something to think about – something that the gifted writer James Moore shares in one of his books. He talks about a “scene in *Alice in Wonderland* where a lock with legs is running around in a panic.

Frantically, the lock runs here, there, and everywhere. Finally, Alice says to the lock, ‘What are you doing? Why are you running around in all directions?’ And the lock says, ‘I am seeking the key to unlock myself!’”

Moore writes, “You don’t have to run around in a panic all the time. Here is the key to life. Just celebrate God as the King of your life and the Lord of all your relationships. Let that be your number-one priority. Put that first, then everything else will fall into place for you, and your life will be full of joy and zest and purpose and mission and meaning and fulfillment. (James W. Moore, “Celebrating God’s Key to Real Life,” *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture Is on It*, p. 57)

Or as Paul put it, “It’s all about Jesus. It’s that simple. Don’t make it harder than it is.”

My friends, may the bread and cup of holy communion today, remind you of the great gift we have been given in Jesus Christ. In this world that will call us in a hundred different directions, may this meal bring us home to the only path to God we need – Jesus the Christ. May it be so.

Amen.