

LECTURE 8 "The Incomparable Christ"

Colossians 1:1-2:29

Well, the World Series is over and sports fans now have their full attention directed to the world of football. Some of you care, and some of you could care less. We can draw an analogy between a football team and the church: Like a team we spend time in the "locker room" learning the rules and how to play the game when we're a part of Bible study groups. Like a team we have a definite goal in mind to win the unsaved and on weekends we "huddle" together for encouragement and motivation to engage in the game strategy for the coming week. The real game, however, is out there in the world (the dominion of darkness). . . defending our faith and offensively seeking to share the good news of Christ by bringing light to a lost and dying world. In every contact we make a decision will ultimately have to be made – "Who is Jesus Christ and how will you respond to Him?"

We've already studied Galatians where Paul's emphasis was on our identity in Christ. Galatians 3:26-28 "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is

neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Then in Ephesians Paul's emphasis was on the body of Christ - the church. In chapter 3 verse 10 he said, "Christ's intent was that now, through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known . . . "; chapter 4 verse 12 "to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . "; and chapter 6 "we should be strong and put on the full armor of God so that we can take our stand against the devil's schemes."

In Philippians Paul emphasized the feet - the experience of the church as it walked through this world. Chapter 2 verse 4 "look out for the interests of others . . . "; chapter 4 verses 4-8 "rejoice in the Lord . . . do not be anxious for anything . . . make your requests known to God . . . set you minds on things that are noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, praiseworthy"; be content in all circumstances for my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus! AMEN!

And now in Colossians his emphasis is on the head of the Church – Christ.

Sometimes it's helpful to have a little background. Colosse was about 100 miles inland from Ephesus in what is now western

Turkey. Apparently Paul had not traveled there on his missionary journeys since he mentions in Chapter 2 verse 1 not having met them personally. You remember from our study in Acts that all who lived in the province of Asia heard the Word of the Lord, so that would have included those who lived in Colosse. During Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Epaphras, who was from Colosse, came to know Jesus as Savior. He returned to his hometown to spread the good news of Jesus and may have founded the church or, at least, was the minister of the congregation there. Colosse was an insignificant city, in fact it's hard to find the ruins of it today; however, at one time it had been a hub of weaving and textile industries.

Nearby was the city of Laodecia (we remember that Laodecia is called the "lukewarm" church in Revelation) and also nearby was a more important city called Hierapolis. Insignificant or not as cities go, the believers in Colosse were not insignificant and Paul wanted all the believers in the tri-city area to be "knit together in love."

This epistle doesn't have a great emphasis on the Holy Spirit, but it does take note of the fruit of the Spirit, namely love. Christians are given four names in Scripture: Saints (for holiness); Believers (for faith); Brethren (for love); and Disciples (for

knowledge). Paul acknowledges a trinity of graces in these brethren – their faith, love and hope. Remember in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul addresses these in a different order – "Now abides faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love."

Have you ever thought about the question, "When does a church look like a church?" When there's evidence of faith, love and hope.

Paul talked about the "hope stored up for us in heaven." Remember Christian hope is not optimism; it's the inner certainty that our future is secure in God's hands.

We might also reflect on the thought, "When does a Christian look like a Christian?" When he leads a life worthy of the Lord (looking out for the best interests of others); when power is evidenced (to endure trials/tragedy with a peace that surpasses all understanding); when gratitude and joy are present (an appreciation of what Christ has done for us that we could not do for ourselves).

That last statement, "doing for us what we could not do for ourselves," is the essence of what Paul referred to in 1:6 when he said, "since the day you heard the gospel and understood God's grace in all its truth."

The gospel of the grace of God is the very foundation of our

faith. If you don't learn another thing this entire year of Bible study, it's my prayer that you understand fully the gospel of grace. In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, people were saved by the grace of God . . . it has never been by performance. The Law was given to show a sinful people how to worship and be a separated people unto a Holy God. The blood of sacrificial animals was a gospel picture of substitutionary death – a type and shadow – of the perfect Lamb of God who was to come.

Paul tells us that it was The Law that showed him what sin really was. In Galatians 2:16 he wrote, "know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." In verse 2:21 he said, "If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" He chided them in 3:3 "After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" They wanted to go back to the comfort of regulations of the Law. The whole point is this – we are saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, we are identified with Christ and His church in baptism. We commit our lives/minds/heart/will to control of the Holy Spirit to replace our self-centered nature with a Christ-centered nature. And we serve Him in obedience borne out of love for what has already been given us, not in order to gain salvation on our own merit or works.

In the in-depth question that was asked about the content of the Christian gospel, we shared in leaders about the "Roman Road" as one easy presentation of the gospel truth. Maybe you talked about it in your group. If not, here it is in a nutshell. If you use these Scriptures from the book of Romans in this order, you will have the gospel outline.

- ❖ Romans 3:23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
- ❖ Romans 5:12 Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, death came to all men, because we all sinned.
- ❖ Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- ❖ Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (That, by the way is justification: The sovereign act of God whereby He **declares** the believing sinner righteous while still in his sinning state.)
- ❖ Romans 10:9-13 If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified and it is with

your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile - the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

(If there is any "work" for us to do, it is repenting of our sin, believing in Jesus Christ as our Savior and confessing Him with our mouths unto salvation. This is what people mean when they say, "you have to accept Christ" or "you have to invite Him into your life." It's a deliberate act of the will to turn your life over to Him. If you can't look back to some point in your life when you did that (maybe you don't remember the exact date), then you need to take care of that. Maybe some of you have been in church all your life, lived a moral lifestyle . . . but you've never really asked Him in. Scripture says, confess with your mouth.)

- ✓ Romans 8:1 (the beautiful assurance) Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

We can rejoice and sing, "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe; Sin had left a crimson stain – He washed it white as snow."

In my Bible I've put a marker on Romans 3:23 with all the Scriptures written in the margin. Next to that verse I've written 5:12 . . . next to 5:12 is written 6:23, etc.

Why was it so important to understand the grace of God in all its truth? Because man is addicted to working for his salvation. Works can be measured in black and white. It's Satan's deception that the world and even Christians still fall for today. Paul was constantly fighting to present the truth of grace. The day you understand grace, you are truly free.

The Scripture in Colossians 1:9-14 is Paul's strong and sincere prayer. He had praised them and now he prays for them before he begins the difficult process of correction. It's a wonderful prayer. He writes . . .

"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God."

That's a wonderful prayer to offer up for your children and loved ones. It's a prayer for spiritual intelligence, practical obedience and moral excellence.

Have you ever known people who just like to make things

difficult? We still need a little background in order to understand the difficulties Paul was going to address. Heresy was infiltrating the Colossian church. As a general statement, the heresy was that Jesus was less than the divine Son of God. Several elements were feeding that heresy.

- ✓ Greek philosophy that said all matter and creation are evil and only the spirit is good; therefore, Jesus could not be God and inhabit something as evil as a human body.
- ✓ Jewish legalism demanded observances of rites, feasts and fasts as necessary for a right standing with God.
- ✓ Mysticism said you had to be enlightened – have a wisdom that only a few could attain to be qualified for salvation. Their false humility, worship of angels, reliance on visions and occult practices made them seem elite and was a true spiritual snobbery.
- ✓ Gnosticism borrowed a little bit from everybody. It was humanistic – do not touch/handle/taste. It ranged from the extreme of subjecting the body to rigorous discipline (which promoted false humility) to the liberal side of "whatever feels good do it."

Obviously, with all this floating around in various forms, what was needed was discernment. Do you ever think much

about discernment? I read an interesting test of discernment: Before you is an apple with some bad spots in it. Sometimes the bad spots aren't even visible on the outer skin, are they? Well, you could eat the apple without regard to the brown spots . . . or discard the whole apple because of the spots . . . or cut out the spots and eat the good parts. That's discernment. It's something we need to exercise with diligence as we weigh the influence of the cults, humanism and all the other "isms" as they bombard our Christianity every day.

In Colossians 1:15 Paul sets the record straight about Jesus in bodily form. He uses the Greek word "eikon" which expressed the idea of an image pressed into a coin or a portrait of a person's likeness. An "eikon" was an exact likeness. In one sense, Jesus is like a photograph of God. But knowing Him is something totally different than having His picture in your wallet. Jesus is the Creator – in Him all things hold together – His body was the reconciling instrument on the cross. In spite of what we once were like, through Christ we are seen by the Father as holy and blameless.

There are four deep, undeniable emotional needs we all have in common: 1) to be loved 2) to feel forgiven 3) to experience

security and 4) to sense an adequate hope for the future. Only Jesus and the cross can accomplish that for us.

It's a simple message of God's love and reconciliation. There's no mystical enlightenment that God gives to only the privileged few. The mystery that Paul proclaims is that . . .

- 1) both believing Jew and Gentile are equal together in the church and
- 2) then the ever glorious mystery of "Christ in you, the hope of glory!" The mystery is not how He accomplishes that, but why He would want to. The fact of the matter is that He does . . . Christ in you, the hope of glory! AMEN!

If ever there were comforting thoughts about being a Christian, they would come with the words ACCEPTANCE and FREEDOM. Jesus fully accepts us into His body the church, but how do we accept one another?

Paul talked about fine sounding arguments, hollow and deceptive philosophy and human traditions. Today's philosophy sounds something like this:

. . . "God helps those who help themselves." Ever hear that? (By the way, did you know that's not in the Bible but Ben Franklin wrote that in Poor Richard's Almanac.)

. . . "He'll love us more if we are good."

.... "We have the power to control our lives." (That's the line of those who promote positive thinking.)

.... "We are small Gods."

.... "He's a loving God and will never send anyone to Hell."

.... "There is no hell."

.... We'll be reincarnated until we "get it right."

Even if we can refute or steer clear of those arguments, we often fall prey to legalism. Once we major on regulations, we in effect move Christ from the throne of our lives and install ourselves. Paul has been constantly faced with legalism regarding regulations for food and drink, holy days and ritual practices. Today, many churches have added a long list to those and they continue to fracture the unity and divide the body.

Circumcision was a primary issue of the Jewish legalists. Their contention was that it was a necessary step to become a Christian. Paul says it's not the flesh that needs circumcision, but the heart and that is a circumcision done by Christ. Our old sinful uncircumcised nature is buried with Christ in baptism. Baptism has both a literal and spiritual meaning. The literal meaning is to "immerse, to dip." As we go under the waters of baptism, we spiritually die to our old life, by faith our sins are forgiven and we come up out of the water a new person. It represents the death,

burial and resurrection of Christ. The spiritual idea of baptism is that we are identified with Christ and we take on His nature. Our debt of sin was nailed to the cross and marked PAID IN FULL by the blood of Jesus. We now live under the New Covenant.

Jesus purchased our freedom from anyone's list that says "you ought to do this or that." The Holy Spirit teaches us how to please a Holy God, He convicts us of sinful practices, He empowers us to change our lives, He confirms our pure motives as we gratefully serve our Savior. Pushing for conformity always results in manipulation and there'll be no genuine unity as long as we're trying to control each other. Christian maturity is to experience unity in diversity.

Well, what does Colossians 1 and 2 mean to you and me? I see four things.

1. Accept what God had done . . . accept the gospel.

We are saved by God's grace and freed from the debt of sin. His love and the atoning sacrifice of Christ's blood has done it all.

2. Ask for knowledge of God's will.

The wisdom that Paul mentions some 40 times in this letter comes by seeking the Lord in prayer and through His Word. A person born again into the family of God is

born complete in Christ. His spiritual growth is not by addition (nothing needs to be added) – but by nutrition. You grow from the inside out as you feast on the Bread of Life in the Word of God.

James 1:5 tells us to ask God for wisdom. Experience brings knowledge, and wisdom applies that knowledge. A burnt finger brings knowledge that fire is dangerous. Wisdom keeps us from playing with fire.

3. Assume accountability for the way you live.

Freedom in Christ is not a license to abuse God's grace. We are responsible to each other and to be Christ's ambassadors in this world. You may be the only Bible the world will ever see. We are to be full of the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. What we believe should determine how we behave. God is still a God of standards for righteousness and holiness. He says, "Be holy, for I am holy." The Christian life is a disciplined life, but our obedience is in response to love not out of dreadful fear of God. Balance is the key and only truly understanding grace brings that balance.

4. Assess ourselves honestly.

A story is told of a young man who popped into a drug store and called an employer to see if he had a job for a delivery boy. The boss said, "No, our present boy is doing a great job." He was the boy – just checking himself. Checking up on ourselves is a good idea. Could Christ say to you today, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."?

Well, at church we have our weekend "huddle." The play our coach calls is STRAIGHT AHEAD offense. Go for it! Paul would agree to that. This has been our mid-week (half time) pep talk. The goal's before us and we know we're on the winning team. Now don't sit on the sidelines . . . get involved in the game!