

# *A Commentary on the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

This commentary is based upon my personal devotional notes and reflections on the *Letter of Paul to the Colossians*. It is intended to help you better understand some of the background and issues in Paul's letter. It is not a technical commentary designed for academic projects. This material is intended for use by members and friends of Southside Christian Church, especially our life group leaders to help you lead your group in a verse by verse study of *Colossians*. However, I do not include discussion questions in the commentary. That I leave up to you as a group leader.

A few things need to be noted. There are occasional references to the original Greek words Paul used in a particular passage. Those Greek words are always quoted in italics and are transliterated into English from the Greek. I go chapter by chapter in the commentary and sometimes individual verses are commented upon, sometimes it is several sentences and sometimes a whole paragraph. This commentary is based on the *New International Version* and all Scripture quotations are taken from that version of the Bible. Books of the Bible, Scripture references and quotes are also italicized.

## **THE COMMENTARY:**

### **Chapter 1:**

*1:1-2* - *Colossians* is one of Paul's "prison letters", written from house arrest in Rome sometime between 60 and 62. It was most likely written around the same time as *Ephesians* and *Philemon* because of the similarity in style, content and people Paul mentions in all three letters. Timothy is with Paul in Rome when he writes this letter as are Tychichus, Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus called Justus, Epaphras, the evangelist who founded the church in Colosse, Onesimus, Luke and Demas. See *Colossians 4:7-18*. The letter was delivered to the church by Tychichus; see *4:7-8*, along with a letter to the Laodicean church which we do not have. See *4:15-16*. We do have a letter to the Laodicea church in *Revelation 3* from the apostle John to that church, which records the words of the Lord Jesus to the church. Philemon was a member of the church at Colosse and it is possible that Onesimus, his runaway slave that Paul had met in Rome, along with Tychichus, delivered the letter to the church along with Paul's personal letter to Philemon. See *Philemon 12-25*.

Paul had never visited Colosse, as the church was founded by Epaphras, a citizen of Colosse, one of Paul's evangelists and fellow workers during his three-year stay in Ephesus. See *Acts 19*. Paul writes this letter because he had learned of false teaching and heresy that was beginning to grow in the church at Colosse and perhaps in Laodicea and the Lycus Valley as well. Colosse was a city in the Lycus Valley about 100 miles east of Ephesus and 15 miles east of Laodicea, the larger, more important city of the valley. The valley was a fertile and well-populated region of the Roman Province of Asia. The heresy itself had a diverse and syncretistic nature. Major elements included: rituals and strict rules about food and drink; angel worship, including the idea that angels supplemented what Jesus had done; the devaluing of Jesus and his

work and position; secret knowledge, similar in nature to the later 2nd and 3rd century Gnostics that emphasized special knowledge as the way to salvation; and reliance on human wisdom and tradition alongside faith in God. All these Paul combats by lifting up the Lord Jesus Christ and his all-sufficient work for us.

Paul says he is an apostle by God's will. He was not raised to be an apostle by popular acclaim but by the choice and will of God. He writes with Timothy his young friend and lieutenant, who was with Paul for part of his stay in Ephesus when Colosse would have been evangelized. Now Timothy is with Paul in Rome. He calls the church in Colosse the holy and faithful brothers (and sisters) in Christ. As we will see from the rest of the letter they were struggling to remain holy and faithful. Grace and peace from God our Father is similar to other salutations Paul gives in his letters.

**1:3-8** - Paul says he always thanks God when he prays for them because of what he has heard about their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for Christians in other churches. The source for these reports was Epaphras, the evangelist who founded the church and was a citizen of Colosse himself. Paul says their faith and love spring from the hope they have in heaven that they have learned about through the gospel that has come to them. The gospel is the word of truth. Paul right away holds up the gospel message as the foundation of truth upon which their faith is built. He will later show that anything that contradicts or adds to that gospel is not the truth and is to be rejected. Further Paul has introduced already the three cardinal virtues of the Christian faith in this first sentence of the body of his letter; faith, hope and love.

Paul tells them that all over the world this gospel is bearing fruit just as it did among them when they first heard it and believed. They understood God's grace in all its truth. Paul hints here at something he will expand upon later in the letter; the gospel is the complete truth of God and it is all they need. They do not need Jesus *AND* something else. In the gospel of Jesus Christ God has revealed all the truth we need to be saved and be in a right relationship with him.

*Verse 7* is an affirmation of Epaphras, Paul's fellow servant and one of their own through whom they heard the gospel. Paul says he has learned of their church through his friend and their evangelist-pastor. He calls him a faithful minister of Christ. The word for minister is *diakonos* or deacon. The title here is probably descriptive and not the more formal office as in *1 Timothy* or *Titus*. It does however point up how fluid the meaning of the word is and how it can be applied in a variety of ways and not just as someone who helps the poor and visits the sick. Epaphras was an evangelist, pastor and teacher and Paul uses *diakonos* to describe him.

**1:9-14** - Paul tells the Colossians that once he heard about them and their faith from Epaphras he has never stopped praying for them. He keeps asking God to fill them with the knowledge of his will and with all spiritual wisdom and understanding. This verse points to a persistent problem Paul had throughout his missionary travels. As he and his fellow workers evangelized whole regions churches were planted rapidly. They were almost always mixed congregations of Jews and Gentiles. However, Paul and his evangelists were often not able to stay for long periods of time in the cities where these new churches were planted to teach and disciple as much as these new believers needed. They would appoint elders in each church and then have to trust the new congregations to those elders along with the Holy Spirit to guide them and teach them. The Jewish Christians would have had access to the Old Testament Scriptures but the new Gentile converts had very little knowledge of the Bible, let alone the sayings and stories of Jesus. False teaching was a very real danger which would lead to a whole church being led astray and

beginning to believe and practice their faith in ways that were contrary to the gospel. What complicated matters further was the state of Judaism in Asia Province. It was already known to be very syncretistic in nature and not as grounded in the Old Testament as the Jews of Judea, Antioch in Syria or Alexandria in Egypt. The Jews of Asia had been greatly affected by Greek philosophy and speculative ideas. That is part of the root of the Colossian heresy and made the need to combat false teaching even greater in churches like Colosse which had only been founded some 5 years previous to Paul's letter. No wonder Paul prayed earnestly for God to give them wisdom and understanding through the Holy Spirit. It was all he could do to protect the young church! His letter is his last resort to correct the false teaching that was damaging the church.

The second half of Paul's prayer is that they live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way. He prays they may bear fruit through good deeds and grow in the knowledge of God. These are themes Paul had written about to the Ephesians. He reiterates them to the Colossians. He prays they may be strengthened with power through God's might so that they will have endurance and patience, giving thanks to God the Father. Paul emphasizes all that the Lord Jesus has given us and done for us, including giving us his Spirit to live in us and guide us. He tells the Colossians that it is God himself who has qualified them to share in the kingdom of light and the inheritance of the saints. This is a direct attack on the pre-Gnostic idea that the Colossians needed special knowledge or deeds to supplement what Jesus had done so that they could "*qualify*" to receive the rewards God could give them. Paul states clearly our place in heaven is wholly and completely a work of the grace of God through absolutely no work or merit of our own. God alone is the one who has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of light, the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom alone we are redeemed and forgiven. Jesus is the all-sufficient Savior. We need nothing more than faith in him alone to save us, sanctify us and bring us to our inheritance in heaven that God has given us through Jesus Christ. The great Reformers would reaffirm Paul's theology with the Reformation slogan "*Solus Christus*", meaning Christ alone! Paul combats the Colossian heresy that taught Jesus *AND* with Jesus *ALONE*!

**1:15-20** - Paul now describes "*the Son he loves*" in one of the greatest theological statements about the nature and work of Christ in the entire Bible. It is possible this is a creedal statement Paul had composed or someone else had composed about the Lord Jesus that Paul uses here. Or in his thinking about who Jesus is the words come to the great apostle as he is dictating his letter. If the Colossian heresy was pre-Gnostic in nature, that is, it viewed matter as evil and therefore Jesus was God but never fully human. Or, he was a created being emanating from the Father who needed angels to help bring us salvation, then this creedal statement directly counters the core of that heresy.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Human beings are created male and female in God's image but we rebelled against God and his image in us has become marred now by sin. In Jesus Christ we can see the visible representation or image of God who is invisible. In other words, if we want to know what God is like we need to look at Jesus. Paul is not concerned with physical appearance here because God is invisible. The image he speaks of that Jesus reveals is God's character, nature, power and being.

Jesus is the firstborn over all creation, the *prototokos* in Greek. The word does not mean that God created the Son. Firstborn refers to who has the right of inheritance in a family. It can also mean the one who is superior and existed before all things. The Jehovah's Witnesses

mistranslate this text and make it out to say that God created the Son and he is the first of all God's creations. The Greek word actually means he is superior to all creation and has the right to rule all creation. He is God!

Paul says that by him, Christ, all things in heaven and earth were created, visible and invisible all powers, authorities, thrones or rulers; they were all created by him. The Lord Jesus is the agent of God's creation. He created everything. The reference to thrones, powers, rulers and authorities is a Jewish rabbinical understanding of angelic hierarchy that Paul borrows here. He uses it to demonstrate that Jesus created the angelic world just as he created the visible universe. He is the angels' creator and is completely superior to them. They are beholden to him for their very existence. The author of *Hebrews* says the same thing in *Hebrews 1:1-4*. Paul says not only is Christ the agent of creation he is the goal. All things were created *BY* him and *FOR* him. Jesus Christ is the reason for the universe and the whole universe, visible and invisible exists for him. Angels have no power or authority apart from Jesus Christ. They are in no way superior to him or need to help him accomplish our salvation. Jesus is the Firstborn!

Christ is before all things, that is he existed before anything was made, including the angels. Jesus is the pre-existent Son who is God and was God in the beginning. John in his gospel in *John 1* says, *in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God*. He too affirms that Jesus was the agent of God's creation. Paul says that in Christ all things hold together, which means that the Lord Jesus not only created everything he sustains that creation from moment to moment. There is an ongoing work of creation that Jesus carries out so that the universe does not wink out of existence. *Hebrews 1* says he upholds the universe by the Word of his power. The implications are stunning! If Christ sustains the universe from moment to moment, including us human beings, then every breath we take is a choice of his and every moment we live is a gift of grace from him. If he withdrew his sustaining work we would all cease to exist! Even those who will reject the gospel and stay in their rebellion and sin are sustained and maintained by the Lord's gracious choice! Do you see how no one can complain before the judgment seat of Christ? We were given every chance to choose Jesus all the moments of our lives because the only reason we lived is because Jesus chose to allow us to live!

Christ is the head of the body, the church. The word head can mean the physical head but here Paul uses the word metaphorically to mean that which is superior, or in authority. He is first, the one in authority over the church which is his body. He is the beginning, the *archa* in Greek, meaning origin, the first cause of the church. He is the firstborn of the resurrection, meaning the first to be resurrected and the cause and reason for all believers' resurrections. God did this so that in everything Jesus might have the supremacy, or in everything Jesus Christ might be first! Paul piles phrase upon phrase to demonstrate that Jesus is superior to every human being and every angel. He is God and therefore why would we need anything or anyone besides Jesus to give us salvation. He is all-sufficient!

Paul declares that God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in his Son. This does not mean the Father created the Son. Paul is referring here to the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father, the Only Begotten Son of *John 3:16* and the Son becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* in *John 1:14*. This goes back to the first phrase of this paragraph, that Christ is the image of the invisible God. The Son has the complete being and nature of the Father. Everything the Father is by nature, character, power and being the Son is. Paul is showing that Jesus is fully God and he is also fully human. These statements are designed to counter the pre-Gnostic views in Colosse that Jesus was either less than God or he was not fully human.

God chose to reconcile all things in heaven or earth to himself through the work of his Son on the cross. God made peace with us; we did not make peace with him. The gospel of Jesus and his cross is God's offer of peace to the human race. We in our rebellion could not be reconciled to God. He came to us and on the cross of Christ shed his blood or offered his life as a substitute for us so that we might live and be rightly related to God. All creation owes itself to Christ. All God's plan of redemption is centered in Christ. In him we live and move and have our being as Paul tells the philosophers in Athens in *Acts 17*. Apart from him there is no salvation. There is no other Name under heaven by which we must be saved Peter tells the Sanhedrin in *Acts 4*. He, Jesus, is first in creation and first in redemption. There is no one higher than him! He created us and only he can save us. *ALL* human religion is completely fruitless therefore because it ignores the Creator and *HIS* plan to save us! As Paul says in *Philippians 2*, Jesus is the *NAME* above every name!

**1:21-23** - Jesus made peace between us and God. We were once alienated from God as his enemies because of our evil behavior. Our minds were hostile to God. Our very thinking was corrupted by sin which is why we could not come back to God on our own. God however came to us in Christ and reconciled us to himself as *2 Corinthians 5* also says. Paul makes a point here of saying this reconciliation was accomplished literally in Greek, "*in the body of his flesh through death*". Paul emphasizes the fact that Jesus was fully human and had a human body that died on the cross. He did more than appear to be human; he was human! In *1:15-20* Paul emphasized Jesus' divinity, that he is fully God. Here he emphasizes his humanity. Paul is counteracting the pre-Gnostic view that was taking hold in Colosse that Jesus only looked human. If he was God he couldn't become human with a material body; that would mean he had taken part in evil matter. Paul shows how wrong this view is and how necessary it was that Jesus needed to be fully divine and fully human to affect our reconciliation with God. Jesus died on the cross to pay for our sins so we could be reconciled to God. And he died so that God could present us to himself as holy and without fault or blemish free from accusation, meaning free from judgment against sin.

In *verse 23* Paul adds a qualifier. He says we are reconciled to God and holy to him provided we continue in our faith that was established in the gospel and do not move away from the hope we have in the gospel. Paul is not telling the Colossians they are about to lose their salvation. Rather he is encouraging them to stand firm in their faith and not to abandon the gospel for some other fruitless way to relate to God. He is exhorting them to be faithful. The sentence is a conditional one with the implication that if one abandons faith in the gospel one abandons the reconciliation God has provided for us. However, we must be careful and not take Paul's exhortation too far. In other places in his letters he is very clear that if we have submitted our lives to Jesus as Lord and the Holy Spirit lives in us then our salvation is secure in God. In *Ephesians 1* he says we are sealed in the Spirit of God for the day of redemption, which is the day of Jesus' Second Coming and our resurrection. Here to the Colossians Paul is trying to point out the seriousness of the heresy gaining traction in Colosse. To abandon the gospel and follow the heresy's teachings is to abandon salvation and our hope for eternal life!

Paul says the gospel you heard and believed has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven and Paul by God's calling has become a servant or minister of that gospel. In Greek the word for minister is *diakonos*, the same word he called Epaphras, the Colossian church's founder. The Colossian heresy was known in the Lycus Valley of Asia Province. The gospel is known around the world. In fact every creature under heaven has heard the gospel. That is a curious

phrase. In what way is it true? I think in the context of the letter Paul is saying even the angels have heard the gospel. God has revealed it to them and the mystery of his purpose in the gospel. The angels of God had to be told the gospel because they did not know it. This was God's great mystery, his plan to save the human race. If the angels didn't even understand and know the gospel until God revealed it to them how in the world can they even help us secure our salvation? The angels are powerless to assist us! The false teaching in Colosse is impotent to save us. Only Christ is sufficient.

**1:24-29** - Paul says he fills up in his flesh, or in his body, what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of the church. The word for afflictions is *thlipsis*, which means tribulations, trials, or sufferings. It is different from the normal word used for Jesus' suffering on the cross, *pascho*. Paul is not implying here that Jesus' death and suffering on the cross were insufficient for our salvation and forgiveness. The idea is that as Jesus' body the church suffers, in other words Christians suffer and in this case Paul suffers, so therefore Jesus continues to suffer in this world as a sign of his saving work. Christ is exalted and reigning in heaven as Messiah and Lord yet because his people still suffer here on earth so does Christ. Jesus had communicated this very idea to Paul on the Damascus Road when he asked Saul why he persecuted Jesus, even though he was persecuting Christ-followers. When the Lord Jesus returns in glory then his sufferings will be at an end because his bride will be finally with him personally forever beyond the reach of suffering and death. Today when any Christian around the world suffers for their faith Jesus is suffering as well!

Paul says God gave him his commission to be an apostle in order to present the Word of God in its fullness to the Colossians and all the Gentiles. That Word is the gospel, the mystery that God has finally revealed to his people, his saints. The gospel contains the fullness of God's revelation to us through Jesus Christ his Son. Nothing needs to be added to the gospel because God has revealed everything he needs to reveal to us in it. There is no need to add anything to the gospel because it is complete! To believe in the heresy taught in Colosse is a futile effort because it cannot add anything to the gospel. In fact it takes away from its message and power to save us!

God chose through the gospel and through his servants like Paul to show the Gentiles all that he desires to bring to us when he saves us. The greatest part of the mystery of God revealed in the gospel is Christ in us, the hope of glory. Jesus lives in us now by faith through the Holy Spirit living in us when we receive Christ as Lord. The Spirit is God's pledge to us that one day Jesus will come again and bring us to himself in heaven to share in the glory of heaven. This is the hope the gospel provides us. We experience salvation and forgiveness now even as we still suffer, but we know we will experience resurrection in the age to come when the Lord Jesus returns.

Paul says his task given to him by God is to proclaim Jesus Christ, and to admonish and teach everyone who believes the gospel so that we might be perfect in Christ when he returns. Paul demonstrates the salvation of God is first forgiveness and a right relationship with God, that is justification, but it is also sanctification, becoming like Christ. The gospel brings both justification and sanctification. The goal of the salvation of God in us is to make us perfect like Christ. Initial faith in Jesus is the beginning of the process. The process is not complete until we are presented to the Father as a perfect reflection of his Son. This is what Paul labors to fulfill in all who believe. He uses all his energy and effort to that end acknowledging at the same time that it is the Holy Spirit working in him and through him that allows him to work in the first place.

We are totally dependent upon the Spirit to change us and to give us the ability for ministry. Our part is to cooperate with him, surrender to him and allow him to work through us. Just as our sanctification is a product of the Spirit's work in us Paul affirms that any ministry success we have is also a product of God at work in us.

## Chapter 2:

**2:1-5** - Paul says he wants the Colossians to know how great he struggles for them and for those in Laodicea and all those who have never met him personally. The word for struggle means a contest like a wrestling match. It can also mean an agony of mind. Paul is referring to his struggle in prayer over them and his fight through the writing of his letter to keep them faithful to the gospel. It is in the gospel that they will have full and complete understanding of the mystery of God, namely Jesus Christ. The mystery of God is not a puzzle to be solved or a contest to see if someone can figure out what God's plan for his world actually is. Mystery refers to God's plan that was hidden by God throughout all of human history and to the angelic world as well and is now revealed in the gospel. The mystery is the content of the gospel, namely Christ or Christ in us, the hope of glory as Paul says in *1:27*. Once again Paul is addressing the pre-Gnostic heresy in Colosse. The Gnostics claimed they had secret knowledge beyond the gospel that people needed to understand in order to truly be saved and attain eternal life. Paul responds with there is no human way or knowledge that could discern what God has kept hidden from the entire universe both seen and unseen. Only God can reveal that mystery and plan and he has done so in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In *IT* are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The Greeks of Colosse would be attracted to hidden wisdom as would the Jewish believers as well. The Jews of Asia Minor were caught up at this time in speculative Greek philosophy and ideas that were said to give new insight and wisdom into God. In many ways the religious and philosophical climate of Colosse at the time Paul writes his letter was very similar to today. There were all sorts of competing philosophical and religious ideas all declaring insight into the truth. Paul simply declares that all the new trendy ideas the Colossians are attracted by are all dead ends. If they want to know more of God and his plan, then know more of Christ! *HE* is the embodiment of the mystery of God. More wisdom, understanding and knowledge will come when we know him better. The same is true today for us! The Gnostics taught secret doctrines; Paul taught Christ, the personal revelation of God himself.

He says in *verse 4* that he wrestles in prayer and argument for the Colossians so that they will not be deceived by fine-sounding arguments. The pre-Gnostic heresy sounded good and sounded intellectual to the Colossians but it was full of deception and lies that would lead them astray. Paul says he might be absent from them in body but he is present with them in spirit, meaning in thought and also through the Holy Spirit who connected them together. Epaphras' reports must have encouraged him concerning their faith but also disturbed him enough he saw the need to write his letter to stave off any damage from the heretical teaching that was starting to appear in Colosse and Laodicea.

**2:6-7** - These verses begin a new section in Paul's letter. They are also one of the great statements describing discipleship in all of Paul's writings. He begins the sentence with a *so then* or a *therefore*, which signifies he is summing up what he has said to this point. The gospel is the embodiment of all of the mystery of God therefore this is what you should do. Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord continue to live in him. The verb tenses here are critical to understand. Received is an aorist active indicative, meaning a point action, a once for all decision

that a person makes. The word for receive mean to take to oneself; to have ownership of something, especially an idea. Here it means to receive Christ as Lord. To live is a present active imperative in Greek, which signifies continuous action which is why the NIV renders the verb, continue to live in him. It is also the mood of command. Paul tells the Colossians that they have received Christ as Lord; they have made a decision to follow him. Now they must continue to live in him, each day, every day. The word for live means literally, to walk. It is the same word Paul uses in *Galatians 5* and *Romans 8* for walk in the Spirit. He is implying the same process here. Live your lives in Jesus continually because he is now your Lord!

Paul emphasizes once again the essential relationship that defines a Christian. Jesus is my Lord. He does not say as many evangelicals in America would say today, Jesus is my personal savior. Lordship is the central relationship of faith. When Jesus is Lord I surrender to him and submit my life to him. His Lordship restores God's rightful place and role in my life. My sin led me to want to be lord myself or I let something else be lord in Jesus' place. When Jesus becomes Lord I give up my rebellion and allow God to be God and me to be his creature again. Jesus' Lordship goes right to the heart of my sin problem. That is why it is so critical to help people understand that the core decision we are asking people to make when they believe the gospel is to receive Christ as Lord of their lives. What makes these verses so important is that Paul then describes the rest of the Christian life. A person once for all accepts Christ as Lord and begins their Christian journey. But now every day they need to walk or live in him. True Christian faith in Jesus as Lord leads to a life of discipleship where I live in him each day for the rest of my life.

Paul fleshes out what he means by live in Christ. We have been rooted in him, which is a perfect passive participle, implying a past event whose effects continue into the present. This word describes our receiving Christ in the past but that relationship continues today. We were planted in him once and for all. Rooted is followed by, *be built up in him*. The word for built up is a present passive participle, implying continuous action that is done to us not that we directly do ourselves. A passive verb means the action happens to the subject. We are built up in Christ by Christ or the Holy Spirit working in us. We cooperate with the Spirit but he does the building not us. Paul is describing the work of the Spirit in sanctification. Our life of discipleship is a life of cooperating with the Holy Spirit, living and walking with him and allowing him to change us. It is not a life of effort to follow a set of rules, doctrines or precepts that we somehow meet and therefore live a holy life by our own power. To overcome sin we need the power of God to change us. We cannot change ourselves. We are to be strengthened in the faith as we were taught. This is another present passive participle, implying a continuous process that is done to us and in us. Paul says to be strengthened in the faith we need to be taught. The word for teach means instruction. Paul tells the Colossians that to live the Christian life I need instruction from someone else, meaning both the Holy Spirit and faithful teachers of the Word of God. I cannot learn how to follow Christ on my own. I need other Christ-followers. Paul is telling us that the process of living in Christ and growing as a disciple does not happen apart from the fellowship of other Christians. The Christian life is *NOT* just Jesus and me. I need his body of which I have been made a part when I received him as Lord! Finally Paul says we are to overflow with thanksgiving as we grow in Jesus. Thankfulness is the attitude of the growing disciple. The more we grow in Christ the more we will know we did not do it ourselves. Our salvation and our life in Christ is a gift of his grace. Our fellow believers who help us grow are also his gifts to us. Paul says that should lead us to overflow with gratitude to God for what he is doing in us.

**2:8** - Paul follows his command to walk or live in Christ with a warning. "*See to it*" is also an imperative, a command. Make sure no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy. The word for, "*take captive*", means to take control of, or gain control of. The word literally means to carry off as booty or a captive in war. The image is of the Roman army conquering a territory and taking many captives as slaves back to Rome or of looting a city and carrying off whatever of value they can find as trophies of their conquest. One could translate the phrase, "*see to it that no one uses human wisdom and by this means makes you, so to speak, a captive.*" Paul is directly addressing the threat posed by the Colossian heresy.

The Colossians, both the Jewish and Greek Christians in the church, were threatened by empty and deceptive human philosophy. It is not from God and cannot save them or make them more like Christ. In fact if they fall victim to it this empty philosophy will carry them off as a captive! Paul is warning them that they need to be grounded in God's Word and the truth of the gospel so that they can perceive the threat and avoid it.

This philosophy is based in human traditions. This is a word that was used to describe the oral traditions of the Pharisees as handed down from rabbi to rabbi. Paul was intimately familiar with the "*traditions of the fathers*" as a former Pharisee rabbi himself. The word implies that the Colossian heresy had an element of Jewish tradition in it.

This is followed by a phrase often used in Greek Stoic philosophy, the basic principles of the world, or the elementary principles of the world as the NASB translates. The word is *stoicheia* in Greek. It represents the four basic elements of the universe in Greek philosophy, and especially Stoic philosophy, traditionally rendered as earth, air, fire and water. The idea was these elements make up everything and there is neither birth or death but only a mixing and changing of the four basic elements. To know the elements therefore is to know and understand the universe. The basic idea of the elements took on supernatural traits when some pagan mystery religions of Paul's day began to represent the elements as supernatural powers or even angelic powers. The word shows us that the Colossian heresy had a very eclectic mix of ideas, both Jewish and Greek in origin. It is probable that those who were teaching the heresy took the gospel and then added elements of Jewish tradition and Greek philosophy to the gospel. The implication is the gospel must agree with and mesh with these other ideas that they saw as equally important rather than the Jewish traditions and Greek philosophical ideas are subject to the gospel as the highest truth of God. We run the same risk today when we try and make the gospel subject to the latest philosophy or idea and hold them in higher regard than the gospel.

Paul's defense against being taken captive by empty ideas and traditions is to be submitted to Jesus Christ. One of Paul's favorite titles for himself was a servant or bond-slave of Jesus. He is our Lord not Jewish traditions about regulations and days or even the four elements of the world. Jesus is higher than everyone or everything in the universe. To submit myself to anything other than him is to allow myself to become a captive and a victim which will only lead to slavery and deception. Therefore the Colossian heresy is not a greater truth than the gospel it is a deception that will take me captive. Paul says see that you don't fall into its trap! We need to guard against the same danger today and test all teaching we listen to against Christ and his Word.

**2:9-12** - Paul reiterates the premise he stated in *1:15-20* that Christ is the embodiment of God in human form. In Christ everything that God is lives in a human being. He is God himself. Why would we need angels or rules or elements-*stoicheia*, or anything else when we have God?

Further Paul states we have been given this fullness in Christ. That means God himself lives in us because Christ lives in us.

Paul then equates the symbol of circumcision with Christian baptism. It is possible that a part of the Colossian heresy was an emphasis on Jewish circumcision as necessary to the "*deeper knowledge*" the heretics offered the Colossian believers. Paul, as he often does, uses their argument against them. The Colossians have already been circumcised spiritually by Christ in baptism. Their circumcision was done not by human beings but by God himself. What was spiritually circumcised, or cut away, was our old sinful natures, the flesh. Baptism is the outward sign of that inward spiritual reality. In the waters of baptism we are buried with Christ and raised through faith in him to a new life. Jesus was raised by the power of God. We are raised as well by the power of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Physical circumcision cannot do that. Only faith in Christ, sealed in baptism can accomplish my spiritual and moral transformation. Paul is challenging the Colossians. Why go back to an impotent Jewish ritual when we have been given new life by the power of God through faith in Jesus Christ, God's One and Only Son? Paul exposes the weakness of the heresy by holding up the truth of the gospel and the all-sufficient nature of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. There is no power or authority that is greater or higher than Jesus. He himself said it in *Matthew 28*. Paul declares the same thing in *Philippians 2* and here in *Colossians*.

**2:13-15** - Paul restates what he said in *Romans 3* and *Ephesians 2*. We were dead in our sin and our sinful natures were powerless to change us and make us right with God. God himself acted on our behalf in Christ. He made us alive to God when he forgave all of our sins. This was accomplished on the cross. Jesus' death on the cross erased the Law's power over us and disarmed the demonic powers that used the Law's demands against us at the same time. Jesus' death gutted the Law's ability to condemn us because he cancelled the moral debt against us and paid it in full! Now we are forgiven and rightly related to God through Christ. This was not our doing it was completely his! We receive his gift of forgiveness when we receive him as Lord of our lives.

Jesus' death on the cross did something else as well. The demonic powers and authorities thought they had won a great victory when they influenced the Romans and the Jewish leaders to crucify Jesus whom the demons knew to be the Messiah. They did not understand God's plan or as Paul says in *1 Corinthians 2*, "*they would not have crucified the Lord of glory!*" Jesus' death, far from being a victory for Satan and the demonic, became their greatest defeat. Paul borrows an image from Roman culture to describe the effects of the cross on the demonic powers. When a conquering Roman general returned to Rome victorious in battle, the Senate would grant that general a triumphal parade through the streets of Rome in celebration. Paraded in front of the general were captured soldiers and commanders of the vanquished enemy. They were made to march before the general's chariot in chains and humiliation. The Romans called it a triumph. Jesus disarmed the powers. The word literally means to strip off or strip naked. In this context Jesus stripped the demonic powers of their hold over us by cancelling their ability to accuse us and hold us guilty before the Law. The demons no longer can accuse us and condemn us before God because our moral debt has been paid. They still try and make us feel guilty but their strategy is a deception because our sins have been forgiven! Paul says the Lord Jesus did more than disarm the powers he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them at the cross. Paul uses the image of the triumphal parade through the streets of Rome to describe what the Lord Jesus did on the cross. Only God could make the cross, the symbol of shame in the ancient

world, a triumphal victory! The demonic thought they were publicly shaming and humiliating Christ Jesus but God through the cross of his Son stripped the demonic powers of their ability to accuse and condemn us and instead publicly shamed the powers! No wonder Jesus cried out on the cross at the end, "*It is finished!*" Everything that God intended to be accomplished by his Son's death was completed. We could be forgiven and the demonic powers were stripped of their power over us and broken. Jesus at the cross paraded them before all of heaven in chains and defeat! Paul continues to show the Colossians we don't need anything more than what Jesus has already done for us in his cross and resurrection! Our salvation is complete in him!

**2:16-19** - Paul concludes that since we are now forgiven in Christ and the demons can no longer condemn us and therefore have no more power over us, we should not let anyone judge us concerning rules and religious regulations. He mentions what someone eats and drinks, or keeping a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath. All of these things are related to the Jewish Law. It appears that part of the Colossian heresy involved keeping Jewish customs and traditions. This teaching sounds similar to the Judaizing teachers Paul had opposed in Galatians and in many other cities where he planted churches. Unfortunately Christians continue to be tempted to go back to keeping rules as if they will help us in our relationship with the Lord Jesus. Paul observes that these religious rules and regulations are only a shadow of things that are to come. They all point to Christ and a relationship with him and his Kingdom. That is the true reality God has revealed to us in the gospel. Like the author of *Hebrews* Paul challenges the Colossians not to go back to the Old Covenant that has been superseded by the New.

He then speaks to them about people who demonstrate false humility and the worship of angels. These people go into great detail about their visions and what they have experienced. Paul calls them unspiritual in mind and proud because of their visions. The result is that they have abandon Christ for visions about angels who are clearly inferior to the Lord Jesus! When we have Christ we have God and do not need any intermediary because the Lord Jesus is God himself! Furthermore, if the fullness of the revelation of God is found in Christ what more could an angel tell us? There is nothing more that God wants to reveal to us other than in Christ! Visions and revelations of angels that claim to reveal to us something more than what the gospel reveals are therefore false. Those who flaunt them have become cut off from the Head of the Body, his church, to whom they belong. As in *Ephesians 4* Paul states that Jesus' Body, his church is bound together and supported, every ligament and sinew, by Christ who is the Head. It is God who causes the Body to grow through Christ and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in us. Paul shows the Colossians that not only do the regulations and visions of those who teach and follow the heresy cut them off from Christ they cut them off from the Body of Christ his church. Paul reinforces the idea that the Christian life is a corporate one. It is a fellowship between Jesus and the believer and the believer and other believers through Christ. Without that fellowship there is no Christian life. In the next paragraph he will show how critical that fellowship is to our growth and the overcoming of sin in our lives.

**2:20-23** - Paul has shown we no longer have to keep all the regulations of the Jewish Law. He now states the Colossians have died to the "*basic principles of this world*", the *stoicheia*. The Colossian believers are not bound by the Jewish Law nor are they bound by Greek philosophy which also led to rules and regulations about what they could eat, or drink or do. Before they met Christ the Greek believers were caught in a world where they believed the elements controlled them and therefore they had to live in such a way that they were in line with the *stoicheia*. Paul

tells them all these things, the Jewish Law and the rules of Greek philosophy, are destined to perish because they are all man-made. They appear to be wise. However, all their ascetic regulations and worship rituals are futile because they cannot produce any real change in us or help us to overcome our sensual and sinful desires.

Paul states a fundamental premise of the Christian faith: rules and regulations cannot change my character and desires. Outward behavior will never result in inward transformation. If I desire to change that change must go deeper into my heart and character. Only by walking in the Spirit, living in Christ, every day can I do that. Rules seem like they should work but they are the "easy button." When I use them to effect change I am trying to work from the outside in and rules will never change my heart. All they will do is increasingly show me what is truly in my heart. Human effort will never sanctify me just like human effort will never justify me. In order to truly change I need Christ in me, the hope of glory. God himself must transform my character. As C.S. Lewis observes in *Mere Christianity*, if I am a field planted with grass seed but I want to be wheat, cutting the grass may keep it short but I shall never produce wheat. The change must go deeper; I must be plowed up and re-sown. My very nature must be changed and only God has the power to do that!

### **Chapter 3:**

**3:1-4** - Paul has been showing the Colossians why Jesus is superior to angels, or the Jewish Law or Greek philosophy and why they need nothing more than a relationship with Jesus Christ as revealed in the gospel. He has been speaking directly against the false teaching current in Colosse. Now Paul shifts his emphasis to the implications of the gospel in their lives. If the Colossian heresy produced an increasing emphasis on outward rules what does the gospel produce in us and how does one live it out in one's life? Chapter 3 and the first part of chapter 4 deal with these questions.

Paul begins by reminding the Colossian believers of their status in Christ. They have been raised with him. The verb is an aorist passive indicative in Greek, meaning a once for all action has occurred and they have been included into that action. The verb is passive meaning they did not raise themselves God raised them with Christ when he was raised from the dead. Paul is expressing the already-not yet character of the gospel. Jesus has been raised and because God included us in Christ we have been raised as well. The status of being raised is appropriated to us when we receive Jesus as Lord. In God's sight we are already raised with Christ. The benefits of that resurrection however we have yet to experience. That is the not yet part of Jesus' resurrection for us. Our bodies will still die yet our spirits will be present with the Lord Jesus in heaven after we die. We will receive a full resurrected body when Jesus returns to earth at his Second Coming. In the meantime those who have died in Christ will wait in heaven for Jesus' return. What that waiting will be like in a place where there is no time we do not know and God does not say.

Paul tells us from now on we need to consider who we are from God's perspective not the world's. We died to sin and the world when God included us into Christ on the cross. We were raised with him because God included us into Christ in his resurrection. Paul does not explain how God did this he only states that he did it! He has already shown Jesus is both fully human and fully divine and is capable of doing everything God wanted him to do for our redemption and salvation. That salvation also includes our resurrection. Since we are already raised to life in Christ we need to "*set our hearts on things above.*" The verb normally means to seek or investigate. In this context it means to strive for, desire, or look for. In other words, don't seek

earthly glory, or focus on anything this world has to offer, like power, success, or wealth. None of those things will last in eternity. Seek what Christ has to offer us; salvation, his character, eternal glory and eternal life! Those things will last forever. Focus on Christ and daily living with him. The verb for, "*set your hearts on*" is a present imperative, which implies continuous action. It is something Paul says we need to do every day. The world will want to pull our focus downwards to what it can offer. It is relentless and is always tugging at us to seek the wrong things, things that are empty. Paul tells us every day we need to decide to focus on Christ and what he has to offer because we live in him now that we have received the gospel.

Paul reinforces the command to set our hearts on things above in *verse 2* when he tells us to set our minds on things above. The verb means to ponder, consider, or focus upon. What should the believer think about? What should we focus our desires, plans and thoughts upon? We focus on the things of Christ and what he gives us and is doing in us. Earthly things are temporary and will pass away. Paul says the same thing in *Romans 8* when he tells the Romans to set their minds on the things of the Spirit as they walk in the Spirit.

Furthermore, we died and our life is now hidden with Christ in God. Paul emphasizes God's perspective once again. We were in Christ when he died on the cross and in Christ when he rose from the dead. That reality has become our reality through faith in the Lord Jesus by believing the gospel. I died to the world and to sin. I live now to God. My life is hidden in Christ with God in heaven. The word means to conceal or keep secret. In the context here it means to keep safe. The eternal life Jesus has secured for me through his cross and resurrection is safe with him in heaven. No one can take it from me because no one or nothing can take it from him! As Jesus said in *John 10*, no one can snatch his sheep from his hand. Paul concludes his thought by once again expressing the already-not yet nature of what God has done for us in Christ. Our life is hidden now with Christ in heaven. When Jesus appears at his Second Coming then we will appear with him in glory. Our resurrected bodies and the eternal life we already possess with Christ will be revealed in all its glory when he returns.

Paul's premise in chapter 3 as he outlines how the gospel leads us to live is to *BE WHO WE ARE*. We are saved. We are forgiven. We are dead to the world and alive to God. We are already raised from the dead. We are alive eternally in Christ in heaven. Now live that way! How we live begins with how we think about ourselves. Who defines us, the world or Christ? Who tells us who we are, the Lord Jesus or earthly rules? Paul will show the Colossians that our new life and perspective in Christ has the ability to change us in ways the rules and regulations of the Colossian heresy never could. True change begins in us when we focus upon, desire and set our minds and hearts on Jesus and what he has already brought us in him. That is the first essential step to lifechange. Believe the gospel and what it tells us about who we now are in Christ!

**3:5-11** - Paul states in 3:3 that we have died to our old nature and we are now alive in Christ in heaven with him. He outlines the reality of our life in Christ from God's perspective. Now in 3:5 he outlines how we need to respond to that reality. We are to put to death whatever belongs to our old earthly, sinful nature. The word simply means to kill and is the verbal form of the noun meaning dead. Paul does not explain to the Colossians exactly how they are to put to death or kill sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed within them. He only tells them to do it, as the verb is in the form of a command.

Fortunately Paul uses several other metaphors in this paragraph that help explain what he means by put to death our old sinful character in us. We are to "*rid ourselves*" of things that reflect the old character of sin in us that are the opposite of Christ's character God is growing in

us; things like anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language. The word for filthy language means obscene speech or coarse talk and is similar to the word Paul uses in *Ephesians 5:4* when he says believers should not use obscene speech. The word for "rid ourselves" means to put away or put out of the way. Paul tells the Colossians they used to walk or live in these things. The word for walk or live is the same word he uses in *2:6* for living or walking in Christ. In *3:10* Paul uses the picture of putting off dirty old clothes, our old nature, and putting on clean clothes, our new selves in Christ. Taken together these three metaphors, put to death, rid ourselves and take off and put on, all describe the process of surrendering to Jesus sinful practices that Christ helps us see in ourselves and then asking him to replace those worldly and sinful practices and character traits with his new character and life. Paul is not imposing a new set of rules here as if rules and law could change our character. The images he uses help us understand that we are to cooperate with Christ in letting him transform us.

Paul groups the sinful, worldly traits into two main sections. The first has to do with our desires, especially sexual desires. Christ-followers have no place in their lives for lust, sexual immorality, the word in Greek is *porneia* and means all sexual activity outside of marriage, and greed which is desiring things we do not have. Paul says greed is simply idolatry. The second grouping has to do with our attitude toward others like anger, rage and malice. That attitude often is expressed in the language we use with others. Thus Paul tells the Colossians we need to get rid of slander and obscene speech and stop lying to one another. A Christ-follower tells the truth!

We used to walk in or live in the old ways of the world but now we are dead to the world. We need to act like who we are. We are saved from God's wrath that is coming on the world because of these very things. Why would we want to continue to live in them now that we know Christ? If Jesus is Lord of our lives there is no place in our lives for these sinful, evil desires and actions. Our new self that the Lord Jesus wants to grow in us is being renewed every day in the image of its creator, meaning God is making us more like himself. That is the goal. Jesus perfectly reflects our Heavenly Father and we are to perfectly reflect Jesus in our character and actions.

Paul concludes by saying in this process of putting off the old self and putting on the new self, nationality and social status no longer matters. All are included in Christ whether Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. A barbarian was simply a non-Greek. Scythians were a warlike tribal people from the steppes of Russia that in the Greek mind represented the least civilized, pagan and crude people in the world. Jews and Greeks separated the world into different kinds of people and valued them accordingly. The point is it doesn't matter what background one comes from when one comes to Christ. Jesus can and will transform anyone who comes to him! We are all equal in his sight!

**3:12-14** - Paul declares that the Colossians, a mixed group of Jews and Gentiles, are God's chosen and holy people. The Old Testament uses that language exclusively for Israel. As Paul argues in *Romans 9-11* and *Ephesians 2-3*, the gospel has included the Gentiles into the chosen people of God by faith and created one new people out of the two. The chosen people of God are now those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and follow him! Paul frequently in his letters declares what Jesus has done for us, the indicative, and then outlines how we are to live as a response; the imperative. He does the same thing here. We are God's chosen and holy people. Therefore this is how you should live.

In *3:5-11* Paul focused on what the Colossians needed to put off or rid themselves of from their old sinful natures. Now he turns his attention to the character of Christ with which

they need to clothe themselves. It is important to understand that these character traits, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience are not native to us. They come from outside of us. We cannot produce Jesus' character in us which is why rules and religious regulations are doomed to failure. No amount of effort on my part will produce something in me that is not native to me. It must be received from the Lord Jesus and put on.

The character traits Paul lists are similar to his list of the fruit of the Spirit in *Galatians 5*. Notice Paul does not tell the Colossians they must treat people with patience or humility or be kind people. He says put on these things that you receive from Christ. When my character begins to reflect Christ's character I will act as Jesus acted and treat people in the way he would treat people. As Paul has taught elsewhere in his letters so he teaches the Colossians; out of a godly character will flow godly deeds. That is how we will be holy and Christlike.

He commands the Colossians to bear with one another and forgive one another as Christ has forgiven them. It is important to understand that these commands come in the context of putting on the character of Christ. Without that process they are impossible to carry out. We do not have the power to forgive as we have been forgiven without Jesus' character working in us through living and walking with him every day. Unless we clothe ourselves with Jesus' character and allow him to work in us Paul's command to forgive will be as oppressive as the Jewish Law and just as impossible to fulfill! This principle is born out in the Greek grammar Paul uses here. The main verb of this long sentence in Greek, which goes all the way through the end of verse 14, is the command to clothe ourselves. All the other verbs in these three verses that we translate as commands in English are actually participles in Greek. A participle is a helping verb that is dependent upon the main verb and helps further define it. That means bear with one another and forgive each other are not separate commands from clothe yourselves. In fact they are still governed by it. We are to clothe ourselves with Jesus' character which includes bearing with one another and forgiving one another.

Bearing with one another means to be patient with each other. We are to be long-suffering with one another. We are to forgive as we have been forgiven in Christ. He forgives us unconditionally based on his finished work on the cross. We are to forgive one another in the same way. Our forgiveness must not be conditional. It cannot be, if you apologize or make amends I will forgive you. We simply need to forgive.

Finally Paul finishes this section with another related command, still governed by the main verb of clothe yourselves. Put on love, God's *agape* love, because it is the ultimate expression of God's character. As Paul said in *Romans 13*, to love one another fulfills the whole Law of God. John says in *1 John 4* God is love-*agape*. Christ's love working in us binds together all his character growing in us daily. Kindness, patience, humility, and forgiveness are all expressions of Jesus' love. When we let the love of Christ flow through us we will be like him and act like him.

**3:15-17** - Paul continues to share with the Colossians their part in cooperating with God to transform their character into Christ's character. They are to allow or let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts. The word for rule is a very picturesque word. It refers to the umpire in the Greek games who oversaw a contest and decided who won or lost. It came to mean to order, rule or control. Paul tells the Colossians they need to let the peace Jesus brings be the umpire in all their conflicts and disputes. Christ's peace will keep their unity and love intact because they are his body and were called to his peace. One of the destructive byproducts of the kind of heresy current in Colosse as it focused on rules and secret knowledge, was it led to people judging each

other as to who was a true Christian or not. It led to arrogance and pride and divided Jesus' church into those who knew the "*secret knowledge of God*" and those who were left out; those who kept all the rules and those who didn't. Paul tells them they are one body together through faith in Jesus alone. His peace will unite them and preserve their unity not destroy it.

He tells them to be thankful. He had told them back in 2:7 that thankfulness was a natural part of walking with Jesus every day and living in him. He reminds them that being thankful is a reflection of Jesus' character and is a major mark of the Christ-follower.

Not only are they to let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts they are to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly. The word for "*dwell in*" means live in. And the word translated richly means in abundance, generously, extremely, to a great amount. In other words Paul commands the Colossians to cultivate a greater and greater understanding of Jesus' teaching and actions and their meaning for them. In the context of his letter the Word of Christ refers to the apostolic teaching concerning the Lord Jesus. For us that teaching is contained in the New Testament Scriptures. Paul counsels them that as they teach and admonish one another in all wisdom their teaching needs to be grounded in the Word of Christ. Paul shows us that the study and application of God's Word is the greatest protection we have in keeping us from falling victim to a heresy like what was current in Colosse. It also helps ensure that when we counsel one another our counsel is grounded in God's Word and not in our own opinions and desires.

Paul adds to let the Word of Christ dwell or live in you, when you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. Many attempts have been made to differentiate between psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. The most popular formula is: A psalm was borrowed from the Old Testament *Book of Psalms* and either sung as is or modified with Christian words. A hymn was a song with a creedal or confessional nature, declaring Christian truth. Some have argued that the great creedal statement in *Colossians 1:15-20* is an early Christian hymn. Spiritual songs were songs composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and were normally songs of praise to God like our modern praise music. This view sounds reasonable and may be correct. The problem is there is very little in the text to tell us the differences between the three categories of Christian worship music in the early church. Perhaps the best we can say is that music played a huge role in early worship as it still does today. Its roots were in the music of the synagogues of the Jewish Diaspora of which Paul had been a part. But, as in churches all over the world, the music was added to when new peoples and cultures came into the church. Christian music is an expression of praise to God and Paul tells us it needs to be grounded in the Word of Christ and reflect God's revelation in Jesus. For us today at Southside music provides us a way to both praise our Lord and declare our faith. We need to make sure whatever we sing in worship is grounded in God's Word. Our music and its lyrics need to be subject to the Bible and serve it rather than serve a melody in a song or the whims of a composer or worship leader.

The phrase with gratitude in your hearts to God governs the whole process of teaching and admonishing or advising one another with the Word and with music. Paul uses the phrase to reinforce the idea of thankfulness toward God and all he has done for us and in us. Gratitude relates to the attitude of praise and thankfulness to God. Our teaching and counsel to one another, whether through the Word or through music, needs to be done out of the context of gratitude to God.

Paul closes out this whole section with an all-inclusive summary. Whatever you do in word of deed do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. The name of the Lord reflects his character and authority. It is a sign of his lordship over us.

When we do something in the name of Jesus we do it under his authority and in agreement with his will. Paul says do everything in life in his name. Nothing we do should be outside his approval and sanction. Whatever we say and whatever we do needs to be in accordance with his plan and will for us and his church. He is Lord and we are his people. God's goal in us is to make us a perfect reflection of his Son, just as the Son is a perfect reflection or image of the Father. Is there any part of life that is excluded from that process? Paul's answer is *NO!* All of life comes under Jesus' lordship and needs to reflect it. That is what a Christ-follower is; someone who reflects Jesus in all of their lives. Paul adds for emphasis, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This is the third time in this section Paul has mentioned thankfulness or gratitude to God. It is obvious this is an attitude the great apostle knows we need to cultivate. It is one of the major marks of the Christ-follower; love in our behavior towards one another and thankfulness in our praise and worship to God. Being thankful is the natural response to the grace of God given to us through our Lord Jesus. It reinforces the idea that we did not earn our salvation. It was freely given to us. If Jesus sustains our lives every day, and if he saved us by grace without any merit of our own, and if he is making us like him every day and someday will come again and resurrect us and bring us to himself forever, then gratitude and thankfulness to God is the most reasonable response. The Colossian heresy put the emphasis back on what we can do through rules and religious regulations. Thankfulness plays little role in that kind of religious system. It is up to us. The gospel emphasizes what God has done for us. Thankfulness becomes the center of our response back to God. That is what Paul is trying to help the Colossians understand. Rules and regulations rob us of gratitude to God. They rob us of a heart filled with praise. The gospel fills us with praise and wonder over what God has done! Paul would have his friends in Colosse rediscover the gospel of the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ!

**3:18-19** - Paul now moves his focus to families; husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters, and the implications of being a Christ-follower in those relationships. Although shorter in length the instructions are very similar to those he gives the Ephesians in *Ephesians 5:21-6:9*.

Paul begins with wives. They are to submit to their husbands as is fitting in the Lord. The verb is a present passive imperative in Greek. It means to voluntarily submit oneself to a person who is worthy of respect, in this case a wife to her husband. It implies obedience and subordination, to put their interests and needs above one's own. The passive voice emphasizes to subject oneself. This is an act of surrender on the part of the wife to her husband. There is no coercion involved. The phrase, *as is fitting in the Lord*, is a Greek idiom Paul uses that refers to that which is proper or fitting to do. The key here is fitting "*in the Lord*". Paul wrote the Ephesians about Christian marriage being a picture of Christ and his church. The wife submits to her husband and the husband in turn loves his wife as Jesus loves the church and sacrifices himself for her. There is an understood mutuality between the submission of the wife and the sacrificial love of the husband. She is to be a picture of us as believers submitting or surrendering to Christ. He is to be a picture of Christ sacrificing himself for his church. Her submission is fitting and proper in the Lord. Without the relationship to Christ of both the wife and the husband her submission is no longer fitting. How do we submit ourselves to Christ? That is how a wife is to submit and surrender to her husband. She does this of her own free will and out of love and respect for him. The further implication of "*as is fitting in the Lord*" is that she is not to submit to

him in things that the Lord would not want to her to do. She is first submitted to Christ, then to her husband. He is Lord not her husband.

Paul gives brief instructions to Christian husbands. They are to love their wives and never treat them harshly. The Greek word for love is *agape*, God's unconditional love. Husbands are to love their wives unconditionally as God loves us. Their love is not to be based on her obedience or if she pleases him or not. They are to love her like Jesus loves us. Paul adds they are never to treat them harshly. The root word means bitter resentment or hatred. In the context Paul is exhorting husbands not to be mastered by any sort of resentment, bitterness or hatred toward their wives. Paul is referring to how they think and feel towards their wives but even more importantly how the attitude of bitterness shows itself in their words and actions toward her. Paul tells husbands it is never acceptable to treat one's wife in a harsh or violent manner. That is the opposite of *agape* love. Christian husbands are never to hit, punch, demean, berate, shove, or abuse their wives in any way. To do so is disobedience to the Lord and violates the character of Jesus God is growing in them. They are instead to love and cherish their wives as Christ does his church. They are to be Jesus to their wives. This in turn gives her the confidence to submit to him as she does to the Lord so that as a couple they might reflect the love of Jesus and his church!

**3:20-21** - Paul now turns to children and their parents. He says children are to obey their parents in everything for this pleases the Lord. The Old Testament is clear in many places that God holds obedience of children to parents in high esteem. Rebellion by children is not according to God's will and is sinful. Paul in *Romans 1:29-32* lists disobedience to parents as one of the sins the pagan world commits and for which God has already revealed his wrath in the world. God designed children to need their parents' guidance and training. They are to be submitted to their parents. This pleases the Lord. A teenager especially needs to understand that one of the ways they can please and obey God is to do what their parents ask of them.

For their part Paul tells fathers not to embitter their children or they will become discouraged. The word for embitter is a present active imperative implying a continuous process not a one-time action. The word means to cause resentment and implies constant nagging and negative criticism that discourages a child. Paul says it is not godly for a father to always be criticizing their children, always telling them what they are doing wrong and never praising them for doing good. When fathers do that, they literally dispirit them or rob them of courage. This is the opposite of encouragement. When we are constantly criticizing our children we take courage out of them to do good or to risk something difficult and grow. We destroy their self-confidence and their faith in God. We are to be people who put courage into our children not take it out. Paul specifically speaks to fathers here and their role as the chief encouragers and teachers of their children but this can also apply to mothers, especially single mothers, who have the burden of raising children on their own.

Children owe their parents obedience but parents owe their children encouragement, love, and healthy, godly boundaries that help them grow.

**3:22-25** - Paul addresses slaves and how they should live as they follow Christ. He does not oppose slavery directly; he merely accepts it as a matter of life in the Roman world. Many families had slaves and some were considered part of the family as they had been slaves for most of their lifetimes. Some were even born in their master's house and served the family all their lives. Paul tells the slaves among the Colossians to obey their masters in everything but do it out

of reverence for the Lord. Work as if they are working for Christ and not for their master. They will receive a reward from the Lord Jesus someday because he is their ultimate master. They have an inheritance in heaven that the Lord will give to them when he returns. Slaves could look forward to a heavenly inheritance God would give them, even though on earth they could inherit nothing. Faith in Jesus changed everything about a slave's life and gave him or her a future in Christ that could not be taken away.

Paul counsels the slaves to obey and tells them that if they do wrong they will be repaid because God shows no favorites. In other words God will not excuse sinful behavior in a slave just because he or she is a slave. He will hold that slave accountable. It is probable that Paul has in mind the situation between Onesimus and Philemon when he writes this more general counsel to the slaves in the Colossian church. Onesimus had met Paul in Rome and become a Christian. He had escaped from Philemon who was a member of the church at Colosse. One of the house churches in Colosse met in Philemon's home. See the little letter of *Philemon* for details. From that letter we learn that Onesimus had taken some money from his master and Paul was sending him back to Philemon in Colosse to pay his master back and be reunited with him not as a slave to his master but now as a fellow brother in Christ. Paul was not going to show Onesimus any favoritism; he needed to pay back the money he had stolen and be reunited with his master. It was the right thing to do. Onesimus and his situation would serve as a living illustration for how Paul was telling slaves they needed to act towards their masters.

We no longer have slavery in America. However, the principles that Paul gives slaves here can apply to employers and employees. We need to work at our jobs as if we were working for Christ because we are. We need to do our best and work with excellence in order to honor our Lord. In due time, he will reward us and give us the inheritance he has kept in heaven for us.

## **Chapter 4:**

**4:1** - Paul tells anyone who is a slave owner to always treat their slaves rightly and fairly. He reminds them that they too are slaves to a heavenly Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul does not say so here but his counsel reflects his favorite title for himself, a slave or bond-slave of Jesus Christ. Paul is reminding masters that they will be held accountable for how they treat their slaves because they owe obedience to the Lord Jesus. Roman society might have allowed them to do what they wanted with their slaves as they were their property. God however does not. He holds them accountable for their behavior. Paul in his letter to *Philemon* would encourage Philemon to welcome back his escaped slave Onesimus, not as a slave but as a dear brother. He called Philemon to treat his slave with *agape* love, even though under Roman law Philemon could have had Onesimus put to death. See *Philemon 9-21*. That attitude would eventually erode the entire institution of slavery in the Roman world. Slavery would not disappear because of a slave revolt. It would disappear because of the love of Christ, because ultimately to love someone like a brother or sister in Christ makes it impossible to treat them as a slave.

In our modern context we can apply Paul's counsel to employers and those who own their own businesses. We must treat our employees fairly and justly because we are held accountable not just to the stockholders or our bosses. We are held accountable for how we treat people by our Lord Jesus.

**4:2-4** - Paul exhorts the Colossians to be devoted to prayer, which is the same word Luke uses in *Acts 2* to describe the early church when they were devoted to prayer, the apostle's teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of the bread or communion. They are to have the same attitude

towards prayer as the early believers in Jerusalem. Christian prayer was different than prayer in the Jewish synagogues of the day. In the synagogues there were set times for prayer and liturgical prayers that the people would pray. Christian prayer is far more spontaneous. The prayer Paul describes here is corporate; the people gather for prayer. It is also fervent. They pray consistently whenever they need to pray which is all the time! Rather than wait for a formal prayer meeting believers are to pray over every major decision seeking God's guidance. Whenever they gather the assumption is that prayer plays a crucial role in their gathering. Plus their prayers are to be from the heart not simply formal or liturgical. Those have their role but in *Ephesians 6:18* Paul tells the Ephesians they are to pray continually guided by the Holy Spirit in their prayers. Christian prayer is guided by and prompted by the Holy Spirit living in and among the body of believers.

Paul tells the Colossians that when they pray they need to be watchful and thankful. "*Watchful*" means to stay awake, be alert and be vigilant. The church had almost fallen victim to the heresy Paul writes to combat. They need to pray that they would be on the lookout for any other false teaching that might be creeping into their midst and other attacks from the enemy that would seek to split and harm their fellowship. We need to have the same kind of watchfulness today. Everyone, but especially leaders and the elders, needs to be praying for protection for the church and for discernment for what is taught and what people are saying and believing. We need the Spirit's help in guarding the church and watchful prayers are a major part of our defense. Once again Paul also exhorts them to be thankful. Literally the words read, "*be alert in all thanksgiving.*" Being thankful guards us from being too suspicious and full of fear over attacks that may be coming. It gives us the proper perspective, reminding us of all God has done for us through the Lord Jesus. Thankfulness is one of the main words Paul uses again and again with the Colossians. It is a positive attitude we need to cultivate. Plus it is good strategy for keeping the church safe. When we are constantly thanking God for all he has done for us we are less vulnerable to false teaching about needing more than "*just Jesus*"!

Finally, Paul asks for prayer for himself. He reminds them he continues in chains under house arrest in Rome. See *Acts 28*. He had appealed to Caesar and even though he was allowed to live in a rented house rather than be held in a prison cell, yet because he was an imperial prisoner he was chained around the clock to a member of the Praetorian Guard, Caesar's elite troops. Paul asks the Colossians to pray for him that as he has an opportunity to share the gospel he may do so clearly rather than let fear or the circumstances overwhelm him. Plus he knows at some point he will appear before the Emperor Nero and defend his case. When he appeared before the Jewish Sanhedrin, and Felix and Festus, the Roman governors of Judea, he had used his defense to share his testimony. Was he planning to do the same thing with the emperor? It is entirely possible. Paul knows that when he faces Nero the emperor won't be alone. There will be other Roman officials present as well. Furthermore, when he writes the *Philippians* around the same time as this letter to the *Colossians*, he says that because of his imprisonment the whole palace guard, meaning the Praetorian Guard, had heard the gospel! The guards would have watched Paul in shifts and he took advantage of each shift-change to share with his guards! The great apostle knows he will have an amazing opportunity to share his testimony with the most powerful man on earth when he goes before the emperor. He craves the prayers of his fellow believers for that opportunity. Paul demonstrates by his request that it is not selfish to ask for prayer from other believers. In fact it is necessary. We should never feel we shouldn't ask for others to pray for us. If it is all right for Paul to ask, it is all right for us!

**4:5-6** - Paul gives some final exhortations to the Colossians, all of which are still related to the idea of how we are to live out the gospel and the presence of Jesus in us in the world.

Paul counsels them to be wise in the way they act towards outsiders, meaning unbelievers. He then further defines that wisdom. Make the most of every opportunity. I take that to mean sharing the gospel or one's testimony with an unbeliever. Paul had just asked for prayers for the amazing opportunity that God was presenting him to share with the emperor. We can never know when God will orchestrate an encounter with someone who doesn't know the Lord Jesus. We should always be ready to share, not in a coercive way, but guided by the Spirit, leaving the results to him because we don't know whether we are simply to plant the seed of the gospel in someone or be the one who leads that person to Christ. Paul says our conversation should be full of grace and seasoned with salt. We should never be judgmental or harsh when we share with those who don't yet know Christ. Telling someone they are going to hell if they don't accept Jesus right now is not full of grace! Mercy, forgiveness, unmerited favor and love all are characteristics of grace and that is how we should speak with people. We invite them, sharing with them God's love for them, not threatening them with judgment. Seasoned with salt reminds me of Jesus' saying in *Matthew 5* that we are the salt of the earth. Salt was the major preservative in the ancient world and has always been used to bring out the flavor in food. Our conversations with people are to make them better, to draw them toward Christ not to chase them away. We are to bring out the best in someone, that which is good in them. When we let the Holy Spirit and Jesus' character growing in us guide our words we will know how to answer everyone who comes to us with questions about Christian faith. Paul is talking not so much about giving the right answer but having the right attitude as we share. Peter says in *1 Peter 3:15* that we are always to be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us but to do it with gentleness and respect. Paul's guidance to the Colossians agrees with Peter's.

**4:7-9** - Paul begins to wrap up his letter to the Colossians and includes greetings from various people as he ends it. Paul tells them Tychicus will give them all the news about how Paul is doing in Rome. Tychicus had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the Gentile offering for the Jerusalem poor. He was from Asia Province, probably from Ephesus. See *Acts 20*. He had not accompanied Paul on his voyage to Rome but had joined Paul in Rome at a later date. Now Paul sends him back to Asia Minor with several letters, one to the *Ephesians*, see *Ephesians 6:21-22* and this letter to the *Colossians*. It is probable that he also had the letter to the Laodicean church Paul mentions in *4:16*. Paul calls him a faithful minister and fellow servant of the Lord. The word for minister is *diakonos* from which we get the word deacon. In this context Paul is using the word descriptively and probably not to identify Tychicus as the holder of the office of deacon as in *1 Timothy*. Paul uses the word fluidly in his letter. He had called Epaphras, the founder of the Colossian church a *diakonos* in *1:7*.

Paul says he is sending Tychicus to Colosse so that they may know what is happening with the apostle and Tychicus may encourage them. Undoubtedly many in the Pauline churches were very concerned for Paul under house arrest in Rome and facing a hearing before the emperor. Tychicus could reassure them that Paul was strong and he was ready. He is accompanied by Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, who is also from Colosse. Onesimus would carry Paul's letter to *Philemon* asking him to welcome Onesimus back and to forgive him. Presumably the church knew the story of Onesimus' flight to Rome and now they have heard he has met Paul and become a believer. There was undoubtedly much talk in the church about

Onesimus and Philemon and what he would do with his runaway slave. They probably did not know as yet about Paul's personal letter to Philemon.

**4:10-15** - Paul sends them greetings from Aristarchus his fellow prisoner. Aristarchus had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the offering from the Gentile churches for the Jerusalem poor. He was from Thessalonica in Macedonia. He had been with Paul throughout his imprisonment in Caesarea and was with Luke on the journey to Rome, including the shipwreck in Malta. See *Acts 20 and 27*.

Paul mentions Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. This is John Mark, the author of the gospel. He had accompanied Paul and Barnabas for the early part of their first missionary journey in Cyprus and the southern coastlands of Asia Minor where he had left the two apostles. When Barnabas and Paul wanted to go back to the churches in Galatia they had founded Barnabas wanted to take Mark but Paul refused because he had "*deserted them.*" See *Acts 15*. Paul and Barnabas split up and Barnabas took Mark and went to Cyprus while Paul took Silas and went to Galatia. The split occurred around 50. Paul writes to the Colossians in 60-62, some 10-12 years later. In that time Barnabas had mentored Mark and now Paul tells the Colossians that if he comes to them welcome him. In *2 Timothy 4*, written at the end of Paul's life probably 4-5 years later than *Colossians*, Paul tells Timothy to get Mark and bring him with you because he is very helpful to Paul and his ministry. Barnabas' mentoring of Mark had changed the young man from someone whom Paul did not trust to someone who was very helpful to him.

However, the most intriguing thing about Paul mentioning Mark here in *Colossians 4* is he also sends greetings from Luke in *4:14*. That means that at the time of Paul's writing Mark and Luke were with Paul in Rome. This is around the year 60. Mark and Luke knew each other! It cannot be coincidence that Luke speaks of the "*many who have undertaken*" to write a gospel account of the life of the Lord Jesus in his introduction to his gospel in *Luke 1*. It is also clear that Luke borrows heavily from Mark for the outline of his gospel as does Matthew. Most scholars conclude from that fact that Mark wrote his gospel first and Luke and Matthew used Mark as a chief source and guide. What conversations did the two gospel writers have in Rome as they waited for Paul to appear before Caesar? Did Mark show Luke an early copy of his manuscript? Did they compare notes? Early church fathers state that Mark's gospel was based on Peter's recollections of Jesus' ministry and life. Was Peter already in Rome at this time as well? Did Luke use that opportunity to interview Peter and collect material for his gospel and the history of the early church in his second volume, *Acts*? The possibilities are fascinating and it shows how the Holy Spirit used the circumstances of the writers of the New Testament to guide them in their writing. It also means that if Luke finished *Acts* before Paul was martyred which seems likely, then *Acts* and Luke's gospel were written before 62 or 63 and Mark's gospel was already finished. That pushes the writing of the gospels much earlier than liberal scholarship has always assumed.

Paul sends greetings from Jesus called Justus who was one of the three fellow Jews with Paul in Rome at this time. They have been a comfort to him he says. Even though Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles he always enjoyed the company of his fellow Jews and was still Jewish at heart.

Paul sends greetings from Epaphras the evangelist who had founded the Colossian church. He was also with Paul in Rome. Paul praises Epaphras for his hard work and prayer on behalf of the Colossians. He says he vouches for him and his efforts on their behalf as well as those in Laodicea and Hierapolis, two other cities in the Lycus Valley east of Ephesus which

Epaphras had evangelized. He reminds the Colossians that Epaphras is also praying for them to stand firm in the Lord and to be mature and full of the assurance of the gospel.

Paul sends greetings from his "*dear friend*" Luke the doctor or physician. He had been Paul's traveling companion on many of his journeys and had joined Paul on his final journey to Jerusalem and had been with him ever since. He had stayed with Paul for the two years he had been held in the Roman prison in Caesarea and had also accompanied him to Rome. After all of Paul's journeys and trials it is quite possible Luke stayed with Paul and cared for him not only as his friend but as his personal physician. It also gave him a front row seat to the spread of the gospel in the Roman world that he would write about in the *Book of Acts*. Paul also sends greetings from Demas who was with Paul in Rome. Unfortunately Paul reports in *2 Timothy 4* that Demas loved the world and had deserted Paul and gone back to Thessalonica. That letter was written at the end of Paul's life after his second arrest when he faced martyrdom under Nero around 64 or 65.

Paul finally greets the brothers at Laodicea, one of the other churches Epaphras founded during Paul's extended stay in Ephesus in *Acts 19*. He greets the woman Nympha, a Greek name, and the church that meets in her house. She was the hostess for the church just like Lydia had hosted the church in Philippi in *Acts 16*.

**4:16-18** - Paul tells the Colossian church that after his letter to them has been read, exchange letters with the Laodicean church and read Paul's letter to them as well. We do not have the letter to the Laodiceans. We do not know why it was not collected as part of Paul's letters. This statement does tell us however that we do not have all of Paul's correspondence in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit did not choose to include the letter to the Laodicean church among Paul's letters that were included in Scripture. Perhaps it was lost or perhaps its content was not as critical to all the churches like *Colossians*. We don't know. Early church tradition says the Colossian slave Onesimus became bishop of Ephesus and was instrumental in collecting Paul's letters and gathering them into a book that continued to be read and quoted in the early church as apostolic teaching and authoritative Scripture. Eventually as the New Testament was formed they were included along with the gospels and the other general letters.

Paul sends a personal message to Archippus to complete the work he has received from the Lord. In *Philemon 2* Paul greets Archippus as a fellow soldier and acknowledges the church in Colosse that meets in the home of Philemon, Apphia Philemon's wife and Archippus. He was probably Philemon's son. We don't know the work to which Paul refers but the way he expresses the charge to Archippus sounds like it was a prophetic charge from the Holy Spirit either through Paul or through someone else, perhaps Epaphras, of which Paul was aware. By publicly citing the charge Paul encourages Archippus to finish his work!

The last line of the letter is common in many of Paul's letters. He writes a greeting in his own hand to the church. Paul most often used a secretary and dictated his letters. That is what he has done here. He does not mention who wrote for him but it is possible since he mentions Timothy in *1:1* that Timothy was Paul's secretary for the writing of his letter to the Colossian church. He closes by reminding them once again to remember his chains for which he has already asked them for prayer. Then he writes, grace be with you. It is a final reminder that our salvation is not based on rules and religious regulations but on the grace of God revealed to us in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.