

Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies

Colossians

Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2015

The Epistle to the Colossians: “Christ in You, the Hope of Glory” (Col. 1:27)

Colossians 1:1-20 – “The Supremacy of Christ”

Colossians is one of four so-called “prison epistles” because there is a consensus that they were all written in the period that Paul was under house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:30-31). The other three are Philippians, Ephesians and Philemon. Not everyone accepts this thesis but it is widely held. There are notable parallels with the Letter to the Ephesians. What is distinctive to Colossians is the challenge of belief in other celestial beings which threatens the uniqueness of the gospel. The opening verses call the Colossians to faithful living climaxed by a breath taking view of the cosmic Jesus Christ.

I. The Hope that Bears Fruit – Col. 1:1-14

As was the case with the other prison epistles Paul is dependent on one of his associates to inform him of conditions in the church. In this case it is Epaphras who has been serving in the church, “a faithful minister,” on their behalf (1:7). Colossae is part of an area of Asia Minor known as the Lycus Valley. There appears to be three strands of false teaching that are threatening the church. There are schools of philosophy that have merged with Christian doctrine. Paul warns against “philosophy and empty deceit” (2:8). This becomes a major problem in the second century as defenders of Christian faith try to reconcile the gospel with Greek philosophy and myth in order to make it more receptive to the Romans. Another concern has to do with what are called “mystery religions” which focused on angels and other celestial being thought to determine the outcome of events on earth (think of astrology). There are also references to circumcision and the law which reflect a Jewish presence in the church as well (2:11-13, 20-23).

Paul however does not begin by speaking about these problems. It is important to note that he begins positively. He emphasizes the fact of prayer right from the beginning (1:3). He makes the statement that “we have not ceased praying for you” (1:9). The “we’ probably refers to Paul’s inner circle in Rome (a group unfortunately that would eventually pull back from him, II Tim. 4:16). Paul commends the Colossians in terms of the essential triad of faith, hope and love (1:4-5; I Cor. 13:13). He also speaks of their outreach, how they are bearing fruit and that they truly comprehend the grace of God. This is high praise, especially from Paul.

Paul's method here is important to note. There are serious problems in this church. There is in fact outright heresy (this is nothing new to Paul as his epistle to the Galatians testifies). However Paul does not begin speaking about these difficulties. These opening verses are positive throughout. Paul acknowledges first the accomplishments of the congregation in their bearing fruit and growing in their understanding in the faith. He then speaks of the aspirations that he has for them. He prays that they may be "filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual understanding" (1:9). He doesn't say that they have been filled at this point but it is a goal which Paul and his team pray for. He wants them to live lives "worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him" (1:10). He again brings up the point about bearing fruit. He wants them to be strong in Christ, "with all the strength that comes from his glorious power." Paul sets before them the twin standards of endurance and joy (vv. 11-12). We don't often combine these two but Paul does. We think of endurance as being difficult and hard. Joyful thanks comes from a sense of contentment. These two elements come together in his lifting up the image of Christ having rescued us from the power of darkness (a cause for joyful thanksgiving) but also having transferred us into his kingdom (this requires endurance as we seek to be transformed into the image of Christ. II Cor. 3:18).

All of this is positive and encouraging. Paul is now going to offer an incredible vision of Christ in his work which leaves no room for the celestial beings or powers whose worship may have infiltrated the Colossians' church.

II. The Cosmic Christ – 1:15-20

Consider all the claims which Paul makes here about Christ. He is

1. The image of the invisible God
2. The firstborn of all creation – I Peter 1:20
3. All things have been created through him and for him – "all things in heaven and on earth"
– physical and spiritual
4. In him all things hold together
5. The head of the church
6. The firstborn from the dead
7. The one who has first place in everything
8. All the fullness of God
9. The one who reconciles all things, whether on earth or in heaven
10. The one who makes peace through the blood of the cross

To call this breathtaking is putting it mildly.

It is not just the fact that Christ is fully divine (the fullness of God dwells in him bodily). Christ is the Lord of the cosmos, what we would call the universe. He is the center of every aspect of life – science, art, politics, economics, history, education. Everything holds together in him. The mystery of freedom is essential to the world God created. In this freedom spirits, humans, even social structures may rebel against him. It is not only that he defeats them in his victory on the cross (which we will see in the next chapter) they have no existence apart from him, "all things in heaven and on earth." Jesus has first place in everything, everything from political elections to the

stock market to comic books (at the recent Comicon in New York I saw a copy of the comic book special, "The Story of Jesus").

Paul concludes this great statement of praise by affirming the full deity of Christ ("in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell"). There is the final awe inspiring statement that through Christ God was reconciling to himself "all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." When Paul uses the term "all" he does so in a way that allows for no exceptions ("all have sinned," "all things work together for good," "in all these things we are more than conquerors"). The meaning of these phrases collapses in there are any exceptions (there is little comfort in being told that "most things work together for good"). Paul is affirming here in clear terms the doctrine of universal salvation which he states several times in his epistles (Rom. 1:5; 3:23-24; 5:18; 11:32; I Cor. 15:22; Eph. 1:9-10). Some have avoided these clear statements for fear that they will lead to laxity on the part of both Christians and non-Christians similar to concerns about teaching election and predestination (if God plans to save everyone, why bother to believe, to be faithful?). Yet Paul also believes in judgment (II Cor. 5:10; II Thess. 1:6-9). No one can take God for granted, least of all believers in Christ. There is a healthy tension here which must be maintained. At the same time the fact that judgment has too often been emphasized to the exclusion of the promise of universal salvation has had negative effects and in fact has hindered rather than helped to spread the gospel.

Questions for us –

1. Why do you think it is important for Paul to begin by commending rather than criticizing the Colossians. What can we learn from his example?
2. Have you experienced the combination of endurance and joy in your life? Why do you think it is so important to hold these two themes together?
3. What impact does the fact that through Christ all things will be reconciled to God have on the way we live and witness for Christ?

Colossians 1:21-29– “Promised Hope”

After his focus on the supremacy of Christ Paul now turns to both the hope and challenge that this sets up in the lives of believers. He reminds them of their past when they lived in rebellion against the true God. In this section Paul holds in tension two key and often apparently contrasting themes. On the one hand he emphasizes the role of grace, that solely through Christ we have been made “holy and blameless and irreproachable.” But on the other hand we have the challenge to live out the faith we profess. Paul continues to amplify the theme that salvation is not a status or a possession but is rather a relationship to Christ. The “hope of glory” is Christ in us.

I. Christ’s Act of Reconciliation– Col. 1:21-23

Paul defines the Colossians as having once been “hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (1:21). Throughout these “prison epistles” Paul is calling attention to the degenerate conditions and life style of, in these cases, Rome itself. Many Roman writers themselves (Seneca, Tacitus, Suetonius) agreed with this estimate. We certainly see examples in today’s world of hostile minds and evil deeds. Yet we live in a post-Christian world that still demonstrates some influence of Christian faith. Paul, on the other hand, is living in a pre-Christian world, one in which he said it is shameful to mention what such people do secretly (Eph. 5:12).

All this has changed dramatically not by anything the Colossians have done but rather by Christ’s death on the cross. This is the act of reconciliation that Paul mentioned in the previous passage and is a key theme throughout his epistles (Col. 1:20; II Cor. 5:18-19).

Through Christ’s death on the cross we have been made holy, blameless and irreproachable (1:22). Yet Paul adds a provision. We are to “continue securely established and steadfast in the faith” (1:23). Is Paul saying that having been saved by grace (Eph. 2:5) we know must depend on works? This is not what he is saying. Works are the result not the cause of our salvation (Eph. 2:10). It is striking to recall that the first theologian in church history to basically get this right was Martin Luther (1483-1546). Even Augustine, for all his emphases on grace and justification by faith, still saw works as playing a role in our salvation. Following Luther’s lead, and serving as a reaction against the Medieval emphasis on merit, our Reformed ancestors came up with the doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints.” This essentially meant that once you were saved you were always saved.

There is certainly truth to the claim that salvation is a gift from God leading to eternal life. However I don’t think Paul would have agreed with the doctrine the way it was stated (and the past thirty five years has seen a resurgence of studies in Paul and especially his Jewish context). Western Christianity (essentially European and North American) has always been influenced by Greek categories of thought. Paul knew those categories (he probably had studied them extensively when he returned to Tarsus after

the initial rejection of his ministry). Yet Paul did not follow them and neither can we. So what does Paul mean with his “provided that” statement? If salvation is a gift (which it certainly is) and if all this is a “hope promised by the gospel,” what is he saying? Again for Paul salvation is not a category in which you’re simply included or excluded (the problem with Augustine’s doctrine of predestination which Luther did not overcome). Salvation for Paul ultimately is a relationship, a relationship with Christ. We have been adopted into this relationship (Rom. 8:15). God’s love is unchanging (Rom. 8:38-39). Yet just as adopted or even natural born children can at some point turn away from their parents so we can turn away from Christ. This is abundantly clear in the New Testament. Consider the following examples:

1. Jesus in the parable of the sower describes temporary faith which falls away in the face of “trouble or persecution” or “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth” (Matt. 13:20-22).
2. Judas is a disciple but is captivated by Satan (Luke 22:3).
3. Demas deserts Paul having fallen “in love with this present world” (II Tim. 4:9). The same seems to apply to other disciples, “Phygelus and Hermogenes” (II Tim. 1:15).
4. A number of passages in the New Testament warn of falling away (Heb. 6:18; 10:19-31; II Peter 2; Jude 1).
5. Paul himself even acknowledges that he himself could fall away (I Cor. 9:26-27).

So what are we to make of this? The whole point is that salvation is not some eternal insurance policy. We are in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Just as human relationships can vary, change and even end so, tragically, can our relationship with Christ. The point has to be stressed that Christ will never abandon us (John 6:37). Yet we may abandon him. There are those who will not believe, indeed cannot believe, because Christ, for reasons unknown to us, has not drawn them to himself (John 6:44). We are called then to persevere. We can never take salvation for granted, much less can we take Christ for granted. We need to dedicate ourselves to being “securely established and steadfast in the faith.” Paul warns us against shifting from the focus on Christ (1:23). This is not to discourage us but to encourage us. This is all the more necessary because of what Paul says next about the reality of suffering. At the same time these warnings must be held in tension alongside the universal statements of scripture (1:20; Rom. 5:12-21; 11:32; John 12:32).

II. The Hidden Mystery – 1:24-29

Paul now brings up another deep topic. He talks about rejoicing in his suffering. This sounds very strange to us. When we suffer we pray for healing and deliverance. The last thing we do is rejoice in suffering. Yet for Paul suffering is part of the reality of participating in the life of Christ. He speaks of the sufferings of Christ as “abundant for us” (II Cor. 1:5). This is part of the hidden mystery that he refers to. For Paul part of his ministry to the Gentiles was his participation in Christ’s suffering. This is not something we particularly want to hear. Yet if Christ had to be made perfect through suffering, how much more do we need to suffer (Heb. 5:8-10). Suffering does one of two things. It either

brings us closer to the Lord or drives us further away from him. How we suffer is part of our witness. Our witness becomes most powerful when we choose to suffer in order to benefit someone else. This is what Paul calls bearing one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2). We may not be able to share literally in someone else's suffering. We can however choose to be with them to pray, comfort and sustain them anyway we can. We are told that fewer and fewer people believe in God, pray or attend church. Yet few things are more powerful than saying to a person, "I will pray for you." Whether or not a person has faith that promise, made sincerely and humbly, is one of the best ways to communicate the gospel.

Paul reminds us that we are all examples of Christ. The final hidden mystery is that Christ is in us. This is our hope of glory. We can never forget that our purpose is to communicate Christ. Paul speaks of the dedication of his ministry in terms of toiling and struggling with all the energy that God gives him (1:29). Toil is work but that is not all that is called for. We are to struggle. This is the participation in suffering. Without this we will not experience the full "hope of glory."

The gospel is good news but it is also a warning. This is an important balance to maintain. Sin is real and the devil is active. Yet people cannot be threatened or frightened into faith. The issue is Christ and nothing else. The goal is to present everyone mature in Christ. There are no exceptions.

Questions for Us –

1. What are some of the ways we can "continue securely established and steadfast in the faith?"
2. What does it mean for us to share in the sufferings of Christ?
3. Do we communicate the "hope of glory" in the way we lead our lives? What would be some examples of that hope?

Colossians 2:1-15 – “Rooted in Faith, Disarming the Powers”

Paul writing her from his housebound imprisonment in Rome is encouraging the Colossians to continue living both in and for Christ. This is a struggle on many fronts. First we have to accept the fact that the gospel ultimately is “a mystery.” We can never understand it fully. Second, there is the temptation of “philosophy and empty deceit.” Finally there is the outright opposition of the “rulers and authorities,” both physical and spiritual.” The answer to all the challenges is to be “abounding in thanksgiving” (Col. 2:7).

I. Struggling in the Faith – 2:1-8

Paul begins this section speaking of how much he is struggling for the Colossians. This is another example of Paul’s twofold emphasis on the life of faith. It is not only that we have been/will be saved (Rom. 5:9). We also have the ongoing struggle between the flesh and the spirit (Gal. 5:17). There is the further duality, mentioned here, between joy and trial. The gospel is full of joy. Yet it is also a struggle. It involves pain and suffering. Both pain and joy are often present (II Cor. 2:1-3). This is the context out of which Paul is speaking.

Given these challenges there are three themes that Paul emphasizes in this opening section. The first is encouragement (2:2). He wants the Colossians to be encouraged. Yet, even to say this acknowledges that we often face discouragement both in ourselves and others. Paul reminds us that “Christ himself” is with us. God made him perfect through suffering. How much more then does this apply to us (Heb. 2:10)? Second, he calls the Colossians to be “united in love.” When Paul says this he is not saying that there can be no differences, even debates, among them. Yet love must be the overarching theme. It certainly was for Paul (I Cor. 13). This love however is not indulgence. It can and must exist alongside discipline and correction (I Cor. 5:1-5). Yet love remains the defining characteristic of the Christian life. Third, they need to realize that in Christ are found “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” This is one of several breathtaking statements that Paul makes in this passage. It is also why we need always to remember that our faith resides in a “mystery.” Paul uses this word four times in this short epistle. Paul however is not saying that all spiritual wisdom is found in Christ. That is certainly true but it is inadequate. Paul is saying nothing less than “all” (a word for Paul that rarely admits of any exceptions) the treasures of knowledge and wisdom are found in Christ. Think of what Paul is saying here! All science, all literature, all poetry, all philosophy, all economics, all politics, all wisdom and knowledge is found in Christ. Paul emphatically here is rejecting any sacred/secular separation. The Colossians are surrounded by all sorts of wisdom from classical Greek philosophy to astrology and angel worship. Whatever is of value in any area of wisdom or knowledge is bound up in Christ (Phil. 4:8). The Christian life is not defined by restrictions or rejection of the world. Yes, we are to discern the spirits (I John 4:1). Yes, we are to be aware of the false values of the world (I John 2:15-17). But Christ did not come to save only those within the church. He came to save the world (I John 4:14). In the context of Roman emperor worship to call Jesus the Savior of the world was a clear political statement. Caesar was the alleged Savior of the world (as many ancient inscriptions attest).

Paul then wants the Colossians not to be deceived with “plausible arguments.” The Colossians are to stand firm in their faith. Yet to be rooted and built up in the faith requires knowledge. To be sure, knowledge is no substitute for faith, much less love. However if we are not to be deceived by plausible arguments we need to know what we believe and why. This has always been a hallmark of the Reformed Protestant tradition. John Calvin’s first published work was a commentary on the Roman philosopher Seneca. When philosophy professors from Calvin College have taken other positions they’ve gone to schools like Yale and Duke. Philosophy majors from Princeton University would come to the Seminary to take philosophy courses. Paul will further explain the importance of this emphasis in the next section.

The overarching response to all that Paul has said here is to be “abounding in thanksgiving.” The riches we have in Christ in every respect are beyond definition. The proper response to the gospel with its message of forgiveness, freedom and love can only be gratitude. Thanksgiving is a wonderful holiday but for Christians every day should be Thanksgiving Day.

II. The Triumph of the Cross – 2:8-15

Paul now expands on the danger of “philosophy and empty deceit.” Human wisdom divorced from Christ has nowhere to go. Our culture has drifted further and further away from any basic Christian awareness. This is not necessarily bad in that it makes the boundary lines between faith and disbelief clearer. Nonetheless to move away from the gospel is never healthy. We have aggressive atheists who attempt to mock the faith. Yet much of this boils down to “empty deceit.” Of far greater concern is the growing indifference many have to Christian faith. Knowledge of the Bible is at an all-time low in the United States. This means that we like the Colossians are called to be living testaments of faith in Christ. As Paul said earlier we are to be the hope of glory through Christ living in us (1:27).

The situation of the Colossians was more challenging than our own. They lived in a world where few people had even heard of Jesus Christ. Paul calls them to rise to the challenge. In Christ all the fullness of God dwells. Christ stands over “every ruler and authority.” This claim is beyond astonishing. Paul is stating that Christ has the final authority over Rome, the world and ultimately the universe. How can this be? How can we know this? Paul reminds them (and us) that God in Jesus demonstrated nothing less than the power of the Resurrection. Jesus was raised from the dead. We participate in that power through baptism which Paul here compares to Old Testament circumcision. Under the law Jesus was cursed (Gal. 3:13). The Romans guarded the tomb (Matt. 27:62-66). The power of the Resurrection overcame all that and revealed Jesus to be over all rulers and authorities. This is the source of Paul’s confidence, a confidence he hopes to share with the Colossians and indeed all of us.

The power of the Resurrection however only reveals the triumph of the cross. In the cross the demands of the law are erased. This is different from saying they are fulfilled or satisfied. That is not adequate. They are blotted out. When something is erased, it is gone, it has disappeared. The cross is the cosmic victory which is manifested in space and history in the empty tomb. On the cross all the rulers and authorities have been disarmed and have been shown publically to have no power. They are being dragged helplessly behind Jesus’ victorious chariot. They are all

there, Marduk, Gilgamesh, Hercules, Zeus, Apollo, the deified Caesar Augustus, Odysseus, Aeneas, Aphrodite and all the rest. Finally at the end of the procession we can see Death, Hades and Satan himself. There is no escape for them. They have been disarmed and made captive. They still speak and strain against their chains. There are still those that believe in them. They can still influence the world and seek to create chaos. Yet now they have been relegated to what Karl Barth called, “the lordless powers.” Their power and authority has been broken, now and forever. We have been set free in the service of Jesus Christ!

Questions for Discussion –

1. What are some of the ways we can encourage each other in the inevitable tensions of living the Christian life (now/not yet, flesh/spirit, struggle/confidence, suffering/joy)?
2. What are some of the implications of saying that “all the treasures of knowledge and wisdom” are hidden in Christ? How can we see through “plausible arguments” and “empty deceit?”
3. What confidence can we derive from the fact that “every ruler and authority” now is under Jesus Christ through the triumph of the cross?

Colossians 2:16-3:4 – “The Things That Are Above”

Paul in this section is confronting the oldest enemy of the gospel. This is legalism, essentially the view that keeping the law or a set of commandments is necessary for salvation. Paul in writing to the Colossians is not only dealing with the Jewish law. The Colossians are surrounded by philosophical and mystical groups each with their own set of rules and requirements. Paul makes it clear that the life of faith cannot be reduced to following laws or commandments. Christ is our life and he cannot be reduced to a set of regulations. He calls on us to set our minds on things that transcend the changing realities of our present world.

I. A(nother) Manifesto of Christian Liberty

As Paul had done in other passages he points out the failure of living into Christian liberty. He has made this a theme numerous times even in the face of those who in the name of it (“All things are lawful,” I Corinthians 6:12) abused it. Paul’s view on Christian liberty which is the main theme here of vv. Colossians 16-23 can be summarized as follows.

1. Christ has abolished the law (Ephesians 2:15). He has erased the record that stood against us (Ephesians 2:14).
2. The teaching of the law in so far as it has validity can simply be summarized as “love your neighbor as yourself” (Romans 13:8-10). This goes back to Jesus (Matthew 22:34-40). The law was never intended as a strict, legalistic demand as Jesus demonstrates on many occasions (Matthew 5:17-42; Matthew 12:1-8; Luke 13:10-17; John 8:2-11).
3. The law in its present form, and given the sin in all human hearts, only gives way to spiritual pride (Luke 18:11-12) or despair (Romans 7:14-24).
4. Paul emphasizes the theme of Christian liberty in all things: “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean to anyone who thinks it unclean” (Romans 14:14). To compromise this liberty is to lose the gospel (Romans 8:1-2; I Corinthians 8-10; Galatians 1:6-2:5; Galatians 3:1-14; Galatians 5:1-15; I Timothy 4:4).

This is the challenge that Paul is facing in Colossae. The life of faith has become a matter of regulations and human commandments. These regulations would not have come only from the Jewish law. The Colossians were being influenced by false teaching from a variety of sources (“the elemental spirits of the universe”). Paul believes that if we truly practice the law of love we will not offend our “weaker brother/sister” (the concern of Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8). Nor will we fall into indulgence, what Paul calls the works of the flesh. Paul is convinced we don’t need a set of regulations and requirements to be able to see selfish indulgence for what it is. Hence he says the works of the flesh are “obvious” (Galatians 5:19). We don’t need a law to be told that.

The other problem with legalism is that it can easily become a matter of “human commands and teaching.” Time and again Jesus confronted the religious leaders of his time with their

rules that were nothing more than human traditions (Mark 7:1-13). Legalism easily becomes a form of misplaced spiritual power. It has the effect of attempting to control other people. As a set of human commands it also becomes a tool for condemnation (Luke 15:2). This was apparently already taking place in the early church with people condemning each other over differences in how to live out their faith (Romans 14:3).

The concern over seeking to do away with the law leads to an early heresy called “antinomism,” which essentially means “anti-law”. Martin Luther was accused of this. The first example however was actually the apostle Paul (Acts 21:17-28). Yet Paul would say that the law was “holy, just and good” (Romans 7:12). John Calvin believed the law could serve the role of a guide for the Christian. However it could never condemn the believer. Unfortunately this distinction was too subtle as Calvin’s later followers, especially the Puritans, fell into varying degrees of legalism.

Paul would say the summary of the law is adequate, “love your neighbor as yourself” (Romans 13:10). Faced with the many transgressions of the Corinthians including everything from incest to prostitution to drunkenness at communion celebrations, Paul could have responded with any number of statements from the Torah (the Jewish law as stated in the first five books of the Old Testament). Paul however never does this. He criticizes the Corinthians’ shameful behavior but always by appealing to the example of Christ (I Corinthians 6:15). The most contentious church debate of the past generation has been focused on the whole issue of homosexuality from ordination to same sex marriage. Now as a number of evangelicals are reexamining the traditional interpretation of the Biblical texts that have been used to support that interpretation, one can only wonder what would have been the result if the law had been replaced by an attempt to apply the rule of love. Paul applies to the law of love to the case of Christians whose unbelieving spouses have abandoned them (I Corinthians 7:15). There is no precedent for this either in the law or the teaching of Jesus.

II. Set your Minds on Things that are Above – Colossians 3:1-4

The answer to the question of how to live the Christian life is not to be found in any form of law but rather in a renewed focus on Christ. In referring to things that are ‘above’ Paul is using the language of Plato which again would have been more familiar to the Colossians than any quotes from the Old Testament. However by “above” Paul does not mean a focus on some timeless truths in the abstract (such as Plato’s ideals of truth, beauty and virtue). Rather Paul is using the language of “above” to focus on the authority of Jesus Christ. Christ is seated at the right hand of God. This is the position of power. We are not finally under the rule of human authorities. We are answerable to Christ. He is the model we must follow, a model which challenged both the religious and political leaders of his time (Acts 5:29),

Paul makes the statement here that our life is hidden with Christ. We are to be so committed to Christ that we seek to live out his example in everything we do. This is challenging because Jesus can seem to be very unpredictable. Yet Jesus’ own example is the antithesis of legalism. Jesus welcomed everybody. He never excused sin. Yet he ate and drank with sinners, i.e. tax collectors and prostitutes. We read over those texts too quickly (Matthew 9:10-

13; Matthew 21:32). We have to imagine what a huge scandal this was for not only the religious leaders but many observant Jews as well. Jesus' message, taken from the prophet Hosea was "I require mercy, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). This mercy is never to be taken for granted. Freedom does not lead to self-indulgence (Galatians 5:13). These warnings however cannot be spoken too quickly. We have a long way to go to demonstrate fully the mercy and freedom of the gospel. We can only do this by focusing on Christ who stands above the confusion and distress of this world. Nonetheless he has the ultimate authority and it is he alone on whom we must set our minds. He needs to be the focus of all our life.

Questions for Us –

1. Why do you think legalism has had such a long history in the life of the church? How can we best combat its influence?
2. How should we respond to others who may want to judge or even condemn us because of what we handle, taste or touch?
3. What are examples of Christ being our life? What does Paul mean when he says our lives are "hidden with Christ in God?"

Colossians 3:5-4:1 – “Clothe Yourselves in Love”

Paul here turns from his cosmic and universal picture of Christ to the realities of day to day living. Yes, Christ is the “fullness of God.” In him all things hold together. He has vanquished the “rulers and authorities” and brought us true freedom. This freedom must be lived out. Freedom is never indulgence or self-centeredness. Freedom comes from love and expresses itself in love.

I. The Characteristics of the New Self – Col. 3:5-17

In Christ we have been set free from the dominating powers of the world, free from fear and free from the condemnation of the law. Paul knows however that he is writing to new Christians who now have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:19). Paul then commends them (and us) to “put to death” whatever is earthly in the sense of the sinful character of the “old self.” He specifically mentions their former way of life which included fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed which he identifies as idolatry (Eph. 5:5). These things comprised the public life of the Caesars and were therefore widespread throughout the empire. The characteristics of the Romans, despite their high ideals of loyalty and faithfulness often came down to sensual indulgence and conquest, a combination of sexual immorality and greed.

When Paul says that the Colossians are to put these things to death he acknowledges that these evil tendencies continue to have life in the community of faith. We still have our “old nature” which fights against the new nature (Rom. 6:6). This then is a matter of discipline. It also includes being truthful with one another along with giving up “anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language” (3:8). Do Christians do such things? They obviously do. That is why Paul calls them to live out the reality of the new self. No doubt Epaphras’ report included accounts of these negative aspects as well as the positive signs he saw displayed among them.

In this warning Paul does not compromise their freedom. He will not invoke the law which he could easily have done since the behavior he warns against is condemned in the Ten Commandments. Another reason for this is that he is writing primarily to Gentile Christians who are only now being introduced to the Old Testament. Yet as Paul has maintained elsewhere the destructive aspects of self-indulgence are obvious (Gal. 5:19-21).

Freedom leads to equality and that is Paul’s next theme. Paul makes it clear that in spite of the continuing presence of the old nature, Christians are being renewed by the power of their Creator, God. One of the key signs of this renewal is the equality that is to exist in the church. In the renewal that comes with Christian faith there are no longer divisions or distinctions between Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free. There were of course multiple distinctions in the Roman world based on class, gender, religion and social status. There were divisions between Jews and Gentiles and then further divisions between Greek and Hebrew speaking Jews (see Acts 2). The “barbarians” were those who did not speak Greek (or presumably Latin). Scythians were the lowest end of barbarians and were often slaves. Paul’s point could not be more clear. The gospel cuts across all human lines of division. The fact that these divisions still exist to this day in Christian communities shows that there is still a long way to go to our being renewed in the image of Christ (Gal. 3:28).

In the next section Paul outlines a picture of this new life in Christ. He makes a number of critical points. First, we have all been chosen in Christ. We did not choose him. He chose us. (John 15:16; Eph. 1:3-10). This fact alone should give us all a good lesson in humility. There are three crucial attributes of the Christian life which Paul underscores here. They are forgiveness, love and thankfulness. These are all interactive terms. We cannot forgive, love or be thankful in some general, abstract way. We have to forgive those who have clearly done wrong. Forgiveness is not easy. It is not some general amnesty where the wrongdoing or hurt is ignored. To forgive is to acknowledge the reality of a fault, a betrayal, a sin in some form and then it is to be forgiven. Forgiveness will hopefully lead to repentance but repentance cannot be a precondition for it. We are to forgive as freely as God in Christ Jesus has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32).

Likewise love needs an object. To love is to love *someone*. Again love cannot be earned. It is never deserved. It is simply given. We do not love others because we find them appealing. We love because Christ first loved us. This is not love in a purely emotional sense. This is love which desires the best for the other person. It is not blind to the faults of others. It knows however that it is only as one experiences unconditional love that it becomes possible to acknowledge one's faults without feelings of rejection or defensiveness. The same point applies to thankfulness. We need to be thankful to someone. First of all we are to be thankful to God for the gift of salvation, indeed for the gift of life itself. Contrary to forgiveness and love, being thankful, at least in the sense of gratitude, is relatively easy. To thank the clerk in the store after making a purchase is a way of affirming that person even in a small way. Paul asks the simple question, "What do you have that you have not received?" (I Cor. 4:7). This should motivate us to be thankful to everyone, literally for everything. Paul mentions thankfulness in some form three times in this passage (vv. 15, 16, 17). Even music should be seen as a way of expressing gratitude.

II. The Christian Household Col. 3:18-4:1

For Paul as well as the whole New Testament, the Christian life is not lived in a vacuum. It is not a separate reality removed from the historical moment in which it is lived out. Concerns about the family were widespread in ancient Rome. Even the first emperor, Caesar Augustus, tried to address this issue. These efforts by and large were not effective. In this period even married women engaged in prostitution. Paul could say that the Corinthian situation of a man having sexual relations with his father's wife was "of a kind not found even among pagans" (I Cor. 5:1). Yet it was certainly close. Men frequenting temple prostitutes was considered no different than going out to eat in a restaurant. It is in this context that we have to hear Paul's admonitions and then apply them to ourselves. Paul acknowledges that cases of sexual immorality existed within the church (I Cor. 7:2).

Therefore he calls wives to be subject to their husbands not in a servile way but as an expression of loyalty and fidelity. Paul bluntly tells husbands to love their wives. He adds, "and never treat them harshly." This was all too common in a world where wives were little more than property. Even in Israel women were considered inferior to men.

Children, unlike wives, are called to obedience with the overarching response that fathers were not to provoke their children so that they would not "lose heart." Paul then turns to the issue of slavery. He is hardly defending slavery or ignoring its many abuses. He is writing in a period in which slavery is a given. It was an essential part of the economy. Paul in his historical context cannot imagine a world without slavery.

What he says to slaves applies to workers of whatever kind. Christians are to perform their duties, whatever they are, as “for the Lord and not for your masters” (3:23). People in authority, whether they are presidents, governors, mayors, employers, supervisors or teachers are never infallible. Yet we are to submit to their authority as unto the Lord. This principle also relativizes those authority figures. They are responsible to God finally and they will in fact be judged by him (Rom. 13:1-7). Paul states this explicitly in chapter 4:1. Masters have a master in heaven to whom they are accountable.

In this remarkable section Paul has outlined the principles of Christian life in the context of the freedom we have in Christ. This freedom includes accountability and responsibility. This model of forgiveness, love, thankfulness and submissiveness is the standard for a faithful and joyful life.

Questions for Discussion –

1. Why is it so often hard for us to forgive? What do we tend to do to avoid facing the need for forgiveness?
2. How can we more effectively live out the equality that is an essential part of the new life in Christ?
3. What are some of the ways we can apply Paul’s guidelines for Christian family and social life today?

Colossians 4:2-18 – “Seasoned with Salt”

Paul now comes to the conclusion of his letter. He emphasizes the importance of prayer (4:2-3, 12). Paul also stresses the importance of the Christian community both internally and how they relate to the outside world. Each name Paul mentions has a special story, some positive, some negative. Paul is writing at a decisive moment in history. He can probably see the persecution of Nero on the horizon. He calls everyone to be “seasoned with salt.” Salt was used in this period to preserve food. It had a sharp taste. Symbolic of the gospel itself, it both stings and protects.

I. Alert Prayer – 4:2-6

Paul here emphasizes the importance of prayer as he does in many other contexts (I Thess. 5:17, 25). Prayer in this context would seem to imply intercession or petition. Paul mentions thanksgiving which is part of prayer in general alongside this specific use of prayer. There are two basic kinds of intercession. There is a general prayer for the well-being of a person, group or even nation. This is similar to the idea of giving a blessing. In this general sense we are asking for God’s protection and care in life in general. There is also a more specific kind of petition which asks for some specific result such as the healing of a sick person. Paul here probably has both kinds in mind. He wants the Colossians to pray in general for the Christians in Rome. In addition he is asking them to pray for an open door. This phrase is found several times in the New Testament and invariably refers to an opportunity to communicate the gospel (II Cor. 2:12; Rev. 3:8). This opportunity, however, is not without challenges and obstacles (I Cor. 16:9). In a remarkable passage, Paul speaks of his desire to visit the Thessalonians but Satan blocked his way (I Thess. 2:18)! We must never forget that prayer is a part of the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged until Christ returns. When we say “I’ll pray for you,” we dare not take that promise lightly. Even if the person has no specific requests praying for them is asking for God’s favor and protection.

Paul is asking for general and specific intercession here. The general is expressed in his statement, “Devote yourselves to prayer (4:2). The more specific is his request for the open door to “declare the mystery of Christ.” As we have seen Paul frequently uses the term “mystery” to describe the gospel (Rom. 11:25; I Cor. 2:1; Eph. 3:1-13; Col. 1:26; I Tim. 3:8-9). We often do not give this emphasis the significance it deserves. To say that the gospel is a mystery is to admit that there are many things we don’t understand. This is not a call to blind faith. However, it does express the reality that we walk by faith and not by sight (II Cor. 5:7). Faith is a mystery. Grace is a mystery. Salvation is a mystery. Even God is a mystery to us. This is why we have to depend on revelation. This fact also calls us to humility. There is much we do not know. When we try to fill in the gaps in our knowledge we easily fall into error of one kind or another. We don’t speak for God. The Pharisees tried to reduce the life of faith to individual texts of scripture. Yet, each statement of scripture needs to be balanced out by other statements. God’s greatest mystery is his plan of salvation for both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 11:25-32). To say that the

gospel is a mystery is not to say that we have no understanding of it. It is enough to know that Christ came into the world to save us through his death and resurrection (I John 4:14). That is our confidence and hope (I Cor. 15:51-57). We need to believe that.

Paul now turns to the relationship of Christians to “outsiders.” Paul wants us to act wisely toward unbelievers. To make the most of the time probably means to make the most of every opportunity. He uses the example of salt which stings and preserves at the same time. Paul is asking us to demonstrate a practical wisdom so we may know how to answer everyone. Everyone? Paul certainly has a broad concept in mind. This is one of the areas in which Christians can have difficulty. It has been too easy to respond to unbelievers with condescension or even judgment. Remember Paul is writing from a Rome in which corruption of all kinds abound. Paul has strong words for those who actively oppose the gospel (II Thess. 5:1-12). Yet most people simply know little about it. That is especially true in our post-Christian society.

Paul gives a basic blueprint of what he means in I Cor. 10:23-33. He gives the example of a believer who has been invited to the home of a non-Christian. He says that the Christian should not raise any question about what is being served. This would apply to the key issue in the church of eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. This would extend to any expression of hospitality on the part of the host, food, drink or entertainment. Paul then adds the even more intriguing possibility that the host may think there could be something objectionable for the Christian, “This has been offered in sacrifice” (I Cor. 10:28). In that case Paul says that even if this is not a problem for the believer s/he should abstain out of regard for what might possibly be a stumbling block for the unbeliever (“Why is this Christian eating meat that has been offered to Apollo?”). In all of this Paul maintains his emphasis on Christian liberty (I Cor. 10:29). The whole focus of this is not to give offense that could be a barrier to communicating the gospel. Paul concludes this section by saying he tries “to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved” (I Cor. 10:33). This is the opposite of the often legalistic and judgmental image that many non-believers see in us. Trying to please everyone is not a matter of being weak or vacillating in our convictions. It is the ultimate conviction which Jesus demonstrated so often of going to where people were, even to “tax collectors and sinners,” for which he was roundly criticized by the religious leaders. Yet this is Paul’s concept of being gracious and seasoned with salt (4:6).

II. Paul’s Co-workers – 4:7-18

Paul now sends greetings from a number of his co-workers. We don’t know the identity of all of those whom he mentions but we do have details about several. The whole range of Christian community is found here. The issues Paul face we face and the church has faced similar issues throughout its history. Here are several that we can identify.

Tychicus (v. 7 is also mentioned in Eph. 6:21-22. He appears to be one of Paul’s key supporters and one in whom Paul clearly had great confidence.

Onesimus is a more complicated figure. He was a runaway slave and is the focus of Paul's letter to his master, Philemon. His mere presence on the team is a social justice issue since an escaped slave was liable to the death penalty. Certainly harboring such a figure was illegal. His mere presence involved a risk. Paul addresses all of this in this letter to Philemon.

Aristarchus is a fellow prisoner whom Paul mentions as one of his team (Philemon 24).

Mark. Is the cousin of Barnabas whom Paul wanted to remove from the team earlier because he had left them at one point. The argument between Paul and Barnabas over him was so bitter that they separated (Acts 15:36-39). Here clearly Paul and Mark have reconciled (4:10; II Tim. 4:11). (Had Paul read Mark's gospel?).

Epaphras has already been mentioned "as a faithful minister of Christ" known for his "wrestling in prayer." (1:7-8; Philemon 23).

Luke is known as the "beloved physician." He alone is with Paul at the end of Paul's life (II Tim. 4:11). He is the author of the gospel which bears his name and the Book of Acts.

Demas was a regular member of the team yet he deserts Paul at the end because he was "in love with the present world." We don't know the circumstances. Was he afraid or had he been seduced by the world? Paul's statement is disturbing ((4:14; II Tim. 4:10).

Archippus had a special task (4:17). Did this perhaps have something to do with the situation between Philemon and Onesimus (Philemon 2)?

Paul concludes his letter by signing it in his own hand. He obviously had dictated it and it bears the style of a speaker more than a writer. His last comment before a brief benediction is "Remember my chains" (4:18). Paul was probably seeing what was on the horizon in Nero's Rome.

Questions for Discussion –

1. Why is it so important to devote ourselves to prayer? How does this help in our coming to terms with the "mystery of Christ?"
2. What are examples for us of being "seasoned with salt" especially as we relate to those outside the faith?
3. What lessons can we learn from the kind of team that Paul worked with?