

Route Sixty-Six

Part Fifty-One

Colossians

Christian Self-Actualization?

(Luke 24:44, 45; Colossians 2:9, 10)

With Study Questions

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10/11/2020*

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Then He said to them, “These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me.”

⁴⁵ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures (Luke 24:44, 45).

For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; ¹⁰ and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power (Colossians 2:9, 10).

Introduction

Having dinner with an old friend, the conversation turned (as it inevitably would) to religion. My thoughtful and congenial friend was careful to avoid, what he perceived to be, a wounding of my faith. His perception was that since my religion seemed to be working for me, he didn't want to dismantle it. He would huff, but not puff, upon my religious house of cards.

As a younger man I would have preferred to dispense with the niceties and move immediately to the bare knuckles. I've come to appreciate the well-meaning, albeit misguided, opinion that the Christian faith is somehow less than the rock that it is. It engenders civility. Yet it appears to be happening less often. O for the strength of Caleb who, at eighty-five, was as strong for battle as he was at forty, the day the Lord spoke to Moses (Joshua 14:10, 11).

Lifting his wine, my friend acknowledged, as many will, his belief in god. But deeply inhaling he asked his question: “I just don't understand all the focus on Jesus?”

I wish I had access to the words of the 16th century English cleric and Cambridge theologian, Williams Perkins, who wrote:

Christ is the substance or subject matter of the whole Bible. Christ stands alone in the work of redemption, without colleague or partner, without deputy or substitute, whether we respect the whole work of redemption, or the least part of it...There is no other name whereby we can be saved beside the name of Christ (Acts 4:12). Christ saves them perfectly that come unto him (Hebrews 7:25). In him we are complete (Colossians 2:10).¹

As we embark upon this brief epistle to the church which met in Colosse, we will learn (or with them, relearn) of the necessity and sufficiency of Christ. We will see that the pursuit of spiritual, psychological and even material peace apart from Christ leaves the human explorer with his head in the clouds and his feet in the mud.

Survey of Colossians

It would be no stretch to say that the brief outline of Colossians is found in directly after Paul's encouraging greeting.

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;¹⁰ that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:9, 10).

It is Paul's prayer that they **"be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding."** This forms the content of the first two chapters.

He then moves to the fruit of this wisdom and spiritual understanding, that they **"walk worthy of the Lord."** Therein lies the content of the following two chapters. As said many times: before telling us how to live, we are told who we are. Or to put another way: before God tells us what to do for Him (and each other) He tells us what he has done for us.

¹ Perkins, A Commentary on Galatians, 274 [Gal. 4:8-11].

Christians are not motivated by a fear of hell but rather gratitude for having been redeemed. Such a mindset is highly critical for true, godly, spiritual peace. The Oxford Group had a slogan, which was said to sound breezy and practical, but was actually fallacious.

Never mind what you believe; the only thing that matter is how you live.

That slogan is far from the approach of Scripture.

Having given the outline, we now look for the theme. It is widely held that the theme of this brief epistle is found in chapter two.

**For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;
10 and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all
principality and power (Colossians 2:9, 10).**

Paul (and, as we have seen, all of Scripture) will press the necessity of and sufficiency in Christ. We are **“complete in Him”**. And the force of this astonishingly bold claim rests on Christ Himself-who He is and what He did/does. As often said, His person and work.

The Father delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love. It is the application of Christ’s blood, the forgiveness of sins, that provides for all the needs of our lost souls. How can Jesus do this? Paul will seek to elevate our understanding of Jesus with a brief, yet unmatched (unmatchable) description of who Jesus is and what He has done/does (Colossians 1:15-18).

- **Visible form of invisible God**
- **Prior-Heir of all creation**
- **The Creator**
- **Before the universe**
- **In Him all things cohere**
- **Head of the body, the church**
- **Firstborn from among the dead**

We are complete in Christ because Christ is the complete Savior. Yet somehow these Colossian Christians had their heads on a spiritual swivel.

Instead of being built up in their faith in Christ, they sought to redefine their faith.

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, ⁷rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving (Colossians 2:6, 7).

How can this happen? What make these saints to susceptible to smooth talking, influential, eloquent, yet specious and deceptive teachers? Paul, as any pastor might feel, was concerned that the members of this church (and others) were being cheated **“through philosophy and empty deceit” (Colossians 2:8).**

This philosophical, empty deception was a bizarre amalgamation of things: the focus and undue reverence for angelic beings/powers (Colossians 2:18); a contempt for the body and things physical—a form of Gnosticism (Colossians 2:20-23) and a false reintroduction to Old Covenant ceremonial practices (Colossians 2:14-17).

There was something enticing about these things. The victims of this deceit were promised a superior spiritual experience along with a greater righteousness and victory over the flesh. But Paul was saying ‘no’.

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false humility*, and neglect of the body, *but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:23).*

How can we be wise when it comes to our own vulnerabilities? In what ways are Christians tempted to dismiss the sufficiency of Christ through ceremonies, ritualism, philosophies and the like; especially when these types of things package themselves as Christianity?

Church history is replete with this sort of mysticism. The use of icons, incense, holy water with various forms of penance. We can see church, rather than an institution heralding the person and work of Christ alone in its handling of the keys to the kingdom, seeking to itself become the door to heaven.

But much of this empty is closer than we think. So-called Christian publishers putting forth books which promise fulfillment through popular

prayers (consider the Prayer of Jabez) or dramatic representations of God in human form (The Shack). We also saw a recent popularization of the ascetic disciplines (fasting, solitude, quietude, meditation, etc.) These are not always bad but, similar to the undue reverence for angels (who are genuine creatures serving God), our focus can easily move from the sufficiency of Christ to the pursuit of what I call *Christian Self-Actualization*.

Self-Actualization became popular early in the twentieth century in the realm of psychology. It was considered the highest level of the development of the human psyche, where full potential is achieved through the fulfillment of bodily and ego needs. This full potential looks different in different people. For some the top priority is self-esteem for others it's love, for others it might be creative outlets.

It is just these kinds of vacancies in our psyches (even as Christians) that make us fodder for the cheaters. It is here that we must avoid making a critical categorical error. As a Christian I may have a strong desire (we might refer to it as a need, but that is generally an overstatement) for the love of another person or to be noticed and included or be productive. We also might find that those desires are not being entirely met.

Then someone comes along and says if you join their religion or their version of your own religion, all those felt needs will be met. You will experience Christian Self-Actualization (though they wouldn't likely use that term). This can become insidious. Like a spouse who feels unsatisfied at home surrounded by clever and attractive coworkers. There is a promise of happiness and fulfillment. You just need to leave, or cheat on, your spouse.

You have a desire for Christian Self-Actualization, so your head goes on a swivel. Instead of working on your marriage-walking in it, being rooted and built up and established in it, you just change your partner. You may not start off thinking this way, but Paul is concerned that these Christians are taking short strides toward a deep drop. It is for this reason that he offers the unsettling conditional conjunction 'if' to their testimonies.

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled ²² in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight – ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away

from the hope of the gospel which you heard (Colossians 1:21-23a).

Fundamental human needs continue even into the maturity of our Christian faith. You need a creative outlet, find a good one. You desire inclusion among friends, make the effort. You desire to be loved, be a loving person fellowshiping with the types of people you would like to be loved by.

And perhaps, in your desire to be rooted and built up in your faith, you should rethink your habits and the extent to which you avail yourself of the means of grace (prayer, Bible reading, worship, fellowship, etc.). But what you never want to do is abandon the only One who is necessary and sufficient to meet your greatest need-the salvation of your soul-Christ, the hope of glory. **“As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him” (Colossians 2:6a).**

Questions for Study

1. Have you noticed people are willing to acknowledge belief in God but not in Christ? What do you make of that (pages 2, 3)?
2. Discuss the outline presented for the Epistle to the Colossians from Colossians 1:9, 10. What are the major points addressed (page 3)?
3. Why are our motives for the way we live important? What are your motives for decisions you make (page 4)?
4. Why can we be confident that we are complete in Christ? What does it mean to be complete (page 4)?
5. How were the saints in Colosse vulnerable and susceptible for deceptive teachers (page 5)?
6. Can you think of examples in our current culture where the church is tempted to view Christ as insufficient (pages 5, 6)?
7. What is Christian Self-Actualization and why can it be dangerous (pages 6, 7)?
8. What must we be careful never to abandon (page 7)?