

Message #8
Colossians

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DEALING WITH SIN
COLOSSIANS 2:11-15

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Last Sunday I told you a little about Yeonmi Park. (PROJECTOR ON--- YEONMI PARK) I provided more of her story on my Monday YouTube video. She is the young lady from North Korea who escaped the country at age 13 in 2007 with her mom. They went to China, then Mongolia, then South Korea, then the US. She graduated from Columbia University in New York City in January 2020.

There was one part of her story which I did not describe. She looked back on her experience in North Korea and realized that she, and most other North Koreans, were slaves. She did not realize it at the time. This was just normal life for her and most North Koreans. The fruit of their labors went to the state. The state controlled what work that they did and how they lived their lives and where they lived.

The state even controlled their thoughts. Yeonmi as a girl knew nothing about the world beyond North Korea, other than that there was this evil country called the United States of America. She went to school for a few years. But she never saw a globe or a map of the world. There was one newspaper which was sometimes available. It contained only information which the government wanted people to know. A few people had radios. But the radios were made so that there was only the government station to which people could listen.

Language was controlled and monitored. There were spies everywhere. Only good things could be said about the country and about the gods who led it, the Kims. If anyone was ever reported as saying anything bad about the Dear Leader, he or she would probably be sent to a labor camp.

The sad thing was that when Yeonmi Park went to Columbia University in New York City, she found some of these same characteristics of slavery which she experienced in North Korea were present in this Ivy League university. There was a certain control of thoughts and behavior. She found the same kind of anti-American propaganda there as she found in North Korea. There was only one political ideology which was accepted. In order to graduate and get a good grade point average she had to obey her academic masters. She later said, **"I expected that I was paying this fortune, all this time and energy, to learn how to think. But they are forcing you to think the way they want you to think... I realized, wow, this is insane. I thought America was different but I saw so many similarities to what I saw in North Korea that I started worrying..."** (Foxnews, 6/14/2021) Probably none of the other students at Columbia would have thought of their experience there as having anything to do with slavery.

The Bible says a similar thing about the status of people in the world around us. The Apostle Paul (ROMANS 6:20) in Romans #6 v. 20 writes to Christians and describes their status before they became believers, saying, “...**you were slaves of sin.**” Jesus told a group of religious Jews (JOHN 8:34), “...**everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.**”

Most people in the world around us don't think about their status and their behavior in that way. We are just all doing our own thing. We are exercising our freedom and our constitutional rights. We are living our lives in the way in which we want to live them. But the Bible also says that there is a Holy Spirit, and that the Holy Spirit convicts some people that their behavior is contrary to that which the Creator God who is there prescribed for them to follow. For those of us in that camp the passage before us today tells us about how to deal with sin.

In recent weeks we have been studying the New Testament book of Colossians. We have seen the Apostle Paul claim that Jesus Christ is ultimately in charge of what is going on in our world. The apostle got reports from a small church in Asia Minor (COLOSSAE MAP) that false teachers in town were trying to lead the Christians away from the truths of the faith. So from his imprisonment in Rome Paul wrote this letter to stress to the Christians there the basics of the faith and the sovereignty of Christ. In our passage today he talks about how that sovereignty is involved in dealing with sin.

I.

First, in vv. 11 & 12 of Colossians #2 (p. 984) he talks about CONQUERING OUR BONDAGE TO SIN. (I. CONQUERING OUR BONDAGE TO SIN) Back in vv. 9 & 10 Paul told the Colossian Christians, “**For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.**” Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, and He has met the deepest needs of those who have placed their trust in Him.

Now Paul writes in v. 11, “**In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ...**” In #12 of Genesis God had made a covenant with Abraham. He had promised to make of Abraham a great nation. He promised to bless all of the nations of the world through his descendants. Also He said that the enemies of Abraham's descendants would be cursed, and their friends would be blessed.

In vv. 10 & 11 of Genesis 17 (GENESIS 17:10-11) God told Abraham, “**This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.**” By virtue of their physical descent and their identification with the covenant with Abraham, the Jews were guaranteed certain promises by God.

Today some Christian denominations see a parallel with water baptism. By virtue of the physical act of baptism certain spiritual blessings are guaranteed to those who have

been baptized. Just as circumcision made one part of the covenant with the God of Israel, so also the physical act of water baptism makes one part of the New Covenant with God through Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There are two problems with this way of thinking. The first is that the promises of the Abrahamic covenant were made to Jews regardless of their individual spiritual condition. They were unconditional promises to the physical descendants of Abraham. God's spiritual blessings today are based upon a decision to trust in Christ, not upon a physical act performed upon an unknowing child. Second, the basis of our covenant relationship with Christ is not physical descent as it was with the Jews. It is based upon a spiritual relationship with God through faith in Christ. In the New Testament there is no clear evidence of anyone experiencing Christian baptism without having first put his or her trust in Jesus.

In v. 11 in our passage Paul speaks of a circumcision made without hands. Obviously this is not some kind of physical circumcision. He is speaking in a symbolic or spiritual sense. He speaks of "the removal of the body of the flesh." The term "flesh" in the New Testament is often used of one's sin nature, of the part of man that leads him to sin against God. In some sense Paul indicates that this sin nature has been cut off from Christians.

How has this been accomplished? Paul says that it has been accomplished through the circumcision of Christ. Is this a circumcision that Christ has accomplished, or one that has happened to Christ? It could be either or even both. Jesus Christ has accomplished this cutting off of the sin nature in Christians. But the basis of that is a cutting off that has happened to Jesus. This cutting off happened when He was physically cut off, or killed, in His crucifixion. It is the death of Christ for our sins that ultimately has freed us from our bondage to sin.

Does this mean that Christians don't sin any more? Our personal experience and the evidence of the New Testament would seem to indicate that this is not the case. Paul explains his idea a bit more clearly in Romans #6. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 6:6-7) In vv. 6 & 7 he writes, "**We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin--- sounds very similar to the term in Colossians 'body of the flesh'-- might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.**"

Paul says that this doing away with the body of sin, or flesh, doesn't mean complete eradication. It means that we are no longer enslaved to it. We Christians still struggle with sin. Paul talks about his personal experience with that in Romans #7. But we are no longer bound to sin. We have the power to resist it.

In Hebrews 2:14 & 15 (HEBREWS 2:14-15) the author of that book writes, "**Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were**

subject to lifelong slavery.” We don't have to be slaves to sin like we were prior to our conversion. We have a new ability and power to resist sin.

Back in our text the idea that the circumcision of Christ refers to the death of Christ is confirmed by the fact that the apostle next speaks about His burial and resurrection. (PROJECTOR OFF) He continues in v. 12, “...**having been buried with him in baptism, in which---** perhaps it would be better translated ‘**in whom'**--- **you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.**” If circumcision is a picture of our identification with Christ in His death, then baptism is a picture of our identification with Him in His burial and resurrection.

The burial of Jesus was proof of His real physical death. The false teaching at Colossae apparently said that matter is evil and spirit is good. The false teachers, therefore, probably cast doubt on the humanity of Jesus and the reality of His actual physical death. They may also have been saying that some further work was needed on the part of the Christians to deal with sin. A little later in the chapter reference will be made to the supposed need to observe certain holidays and to avoid certain foods and drink.

The resurrection was evidence of Christ's miraculous power. He overcame physical death. Now this resurrection power is available to us who are followers of Jesus. All of this is pictured in the act of water baptism. Being dunked in the water pictures our burial with Jesus. Being raised up out of the water pictures our resurrection to new life with Him.

Paul's terminology in this passage may have had special significance for Jews and Gentiles who understood the process by which Gentiles became Jews in the first century. The procedure for Gentile men was that they had to be circumcised. Then men and women had to be immersed in water. Then they had to bring an animal sacrifice. In our passage Paul speaks of a needed spiritual circumcision, baptism in water, and the physical sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

The real salvation, however, does not lie with the physical ritual. Notice that Paul says that we are raised up with Christ “**through faith in the working of God.**” It is faith that saves us, not water baptism.

The key thing in vv. 11 & 12 is that Jesus has removed the bondage to sin in the lives of those who have trusted in Him. This is a great evidence of the power and sovereignty of Christ. Steve was a guy that I knew years ago in Minnesota. He came from a large family. His parents were alcoholics. His brothers and sisters were alcoholics. Steve was an alcoholic. Family events were always beer bashes. Everybody got drunk. Then something happened to Steve. He became a Christian. According to his own testimony he immediately lost the desire to drink alcohol. It was just gone. That doesn't happen to every alcoholic who becomes a Christian. In my limited experience this desire for drink to excess does not instantly disappear for most new Christians from that background. But it happened to Steve. He just stopped drinking, even when he was around his family beer bashes.

Steve is still a sinner, but his bondage to sin was broken. He could choose to go back to that old lifestyle. But he hasn't. His changed life and his freedom from this area of sin is testimony to what the sovereignty of Christ can accomplish in an individual. It is what He can accomplish in us.

II.

In vv. 13 & 14 we learn about another evidence of Christ's sovereignty and His power over sin. Paul speaks about PROVIDING FORGIVENESS FOR OUR SINS.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. PROVIDING FORGIVENESS...) The value of forgiveness of sins doesn't communicate a lot to many people in our culture. The popular view is that man is basically good. At times people do things that aren't so good. But these are the results of negative societal influences. They are the results of poor parenting or bad genes or the lack of education or the oppressive rules of society.

The truth is that human beings have a sin nature. We do not naturally want to follow God. Our natural desire is to please self. To people who become aware of their own sinfulness there is good news. Paul writes in v. 13, **"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses."**

The author is making particular reference here to Gentiles in his audience. Probably most of the Christians at Colossae fit into this category. Historically they had no connection to God's covenant with His chosen people. They were also spiritually dead. They were bound to their sin natures. It may not have been to an addiction like alcohol. It may have been to pride, to self-sufficiency, to greed, to simple independence from God.

Paul describes it as a state of deadness. Because we were dead, God had to take the initiative. Paul says that He made us alive. He gave us life. This giving of life necessitated the overcoming of the obstacle of sin, or transgressions. God did this through Christ. He provided forgiveness.

The word that Paul used for "forgiveness" comes from a Greek word that means "grace." Forgiveness is not deserved. It is not earned. It is given because of the goodness and graciousness of the Giver, God. For people who realize the badness of their sin, forgiveness is a great evidence of Christ's sovereignty.

Mark #2 describes an incident where Jesus is speaking in a house, probably Peter's. A large crowd is gathered. Four men show up carrying a paralyzed man. In order to get to Jesus they go up on the roof, dig a hole through it, and let down the pallet on which the guy is laying. Seeing their faith Jesus pronounces forgiveness of sins for the poor guy. In eternal terms that was the greatest thing that Jesus could do for him.

There were Pharisees in the crowd. They were upset about this pronouncement of forgiveness, because they knew that only God could forgive sins. This Jesus was acting

in the place of God. Jesus knew about their anger. So He asked them which is easier, to pronounce forgiveness or to heal the guy. Obviously it was easier just to say that somebody is forgiven. But to actually grant eternal forgiveness of sins is a much greater feat. It would be evidence of the sovereignty and deity of Christ. So to give evidence of that sovereignty, Jesus healed the paralytic on the spot. The response of the crowd? **“...they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this.’”**

In v. 14 in our passage Paul describes how this forgiveness of sins is granted to the Colossian Christians and to us. He says that it has happened **“...by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”**

The term “record of debt” literally means “a hand written document.” It was used by Greek-speaking people to refer to a signed document acknowledging indebtedness. The particular debts involved here are decrees against people. They are spiritual judgments. They are acknowledgments of coming short of God’s law and being indebted to the holy God who created us.

Martin Luther told of a dream that he once had where he was visited by Satan. Satan brought a record of Luther’s life, written with his own hand. Satan asked Luther if it was true that he had written it. The deeds and words written there were true. They described his sins against God. So as scroll after scroll were unrolled, he kept admitting that all of the sins described were true. Satan was about to leave, when Luther interrupted him. He declared, **“It is true, every word of it, but write across it all: The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin.”** Such it is with the forgiveness of God through Christ.

In the first couple of chapters of Romans Paul points out that all people are sinners. He describes how the Jews all fall short of obedience to the Law of God given through Moses. He shows that Gentiles are given a conscience by God. They also all fall short of obedience to the Law of God implanted there. So all are sinners. In #6 he goes on to point out that the wages that these sins earn is death, or eternal separation from God.

But Christ has interceded for us. In v. 14 in our passage the Bible says that God has canceled out this debt. How could He do that? By means of what Jesus did on the cross.

(JOHN 19:19) In the Gospel According to John #19 vv. 19 & 20 we read, **“Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’ (JOHN 19:20) Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.”**

The Roman practice was to nail a brief statement of the charges against a criminal who was being condemned to death on the cross above his head. In that way everybody

who passed by the public place where crucifixions were held could see why the man was being condemned. The Romans executed Jesus because He claimed to be king. That was an act of treason against the Roman emperor.

Paul in our text says that the real indictment that should have been nailed to the cross above the head of Jesus was "The Sins of Mankind." That's why Jesus died. He died to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. In doing that He canceled out the charges that stand against each of us.

In Rwanda (RWANDA MAP) in 1994 about one million people were killed in only three months when one tribe rose up against another. In dealing with the aftermath of that genocide a justice and reconciliation process was set up to deal with these horrible crimes. The UN set up a tribunal which dealt with the most serious and prominent of the offenders. But there were thousands more who were guilty of doing very evil things. So these cases were referred to local courts. Offenders were promised that if they admitted their wrongdoing, they would be given lower sentences. In the end most were pardoned and had no punishment given to them.

Jesus Christ has likewise granted each of us human beings a pardon. He paid the price by dying on the cross in our place. It is an incredibly gracious thing that He has done for us. But in order to receive it, we must recognize that we have a need for it. We must confess that we are sinners who have broken God's laws. Then we must accept His pardon by putting our faith in Jesus who died in our place.

III.

Finally, in v. 15, we find the third way in which Christ has dealt with our sin. Verse 15 speaks about DEFEATING THE SPIRITUAL ENEMIES BEHIND SIN. (III. DEFEATING THE SPIRITUAL ENEMIES...) Paul writes, **"When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him."**

Who are these "rulers and authorities?" Paul in #1 v. 16 spoke of Christ having created all things, including dominions and rulers and authorities. In #2 v. 10 he spoke of Christ being head over all rule and authority. Contemporary Jewish writers used these terms to describe spiritual forces. The Colossian heretics were promoting worship of spiritual beings. It seems that these spiritual beings are in view here.

Paul now speaks of Christ having disarmed them. These are the beings that the Colossian false teachers promote. Clearly they are not on the side of God. They are evil spiritual beings.

What kind of power and authority did these spiritual forces have? If indeed these are demonic forces, then they have power and authority over sinners, over unbelievers. Paul describes them and our struggle with them in Ephesians #6 v. 12. (EPHESIANS 6:12) There he writes, **"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."** Satan is the

chief of these evil spirits. Together they are at work in the sons of disobedience, that is, in unbelievers. They promote anyone and anything that will take people away from worship of, and obedience to, the true God.

So how has Christ disarmed them? (PROJECTOR OFF) Verses 11 and 12 in our passage have described that. The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ broke the stranglehold that these forces had over people. People no longer have to be in bondage to sin.

What is the result of this freedom from sin that Christ has established through His death and resurrection? He has made a public display of these spiritual forces. What does that mean?

The background of this public display has to do with Roman victory processions. When the Romans conquered an enemy, they would have a big parade back in Rome. The Greek writer Plutarch describes one such public display involving a victory over the Macedonians. There was a three day celebration in Rome. Viewing stands were set up for distinguished guests to watch the parade. Romans showed up all dressed in white.

On the first day 259 chariots passed by carrying pictures, statues, other art works and idols worshipped by the Macedonians. On the second day wagons carrying armor captured from the Macedonians were paraded past the Roman spectators. Three thousand men carrying other booty won in the battle followed that. On the third day 120 sacrificial oxen led the parade.

Then came the conquered king's chariot, his crown, and his armor. Then followed the king's servants and the king's children. Then came the defeated king himself. Then came thousands of captured soldiers. Finally the conquering Roman general came riding along on a white horse. Such was the nature of a victory parade and public display in the Roman Empire.

In our passage Paul is comparing the evil spiritual forces who once controlled the Christians to a defeated enemy paraded before the cheering crowd of good guys. Christ Himself is the conquering general. When did this public display take place?

I suspect that the primary reference is to the resurrection of Christ. The death of Jesus appeared initially to be a terrible defeat for the forces of good. But that was completely turned around in the resurrection. Death was conquered. The mastery of the forces of evil in the lives of people was removed. This was witnessed by people who saw the risen Christ, and it was witnessed by the angels in heaven. Eventually Christ ascended to heaven and took His seat at the right hand of God the Father.

There is a sense in which the public display continues after the resurrection of Christ. It is seen when the timid, cowering apostles suddenly become bold and begin publicly proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah, risen from the dead. It continues at Colossae when Epaphras shows up in town proclaiming the gospel of Christ, people trust in Jesus, and their lives are transformed.

It continues today when you and I, by the power of Christ, resist sin and live changed lives. It happens when Steve turns from a past filled with addiction to alcohol and lives a sober life. It happens when a gal at school who lives for popularity suddenly begins to genuinely care about other people. It happens when a hard-driving businessman turns to Christ and no longer runs over people to get to the top of the career ladder. It happens when Joe taxpayer is converted and starts being completely honest on his tax forms.

Antoine Rutayisire (PROJECTOR ON--- ANTOINE RUTAYISIRE) came from the Tutsi tribe in Rwanda in Africa. When he was five years old, members of the Hutu tribe murdered his father. Later there was an outbreak of violence against Tutsis in the elementary school he attended. Antoine succeeded academically and eventually became a college professor. But Antoine lost his job teaching at a university when a government program barred Tutsis from holding high positions. **“I was very angry because I had a long list of people I hated with cause. But it was during this time that I met the Lord,”** he said.

God helped him overcome many sins, but he had trouble overcoming his anger, frustration and bitterness toward Hutus. **“God, do you really mean to tell me that I can love even the people who killed my father?”** he asked. He made a list of the people he hated and asked God to help him forgive them. **“When I finished that exercise, twenty years of hatred and bitterness had been wiped out in one day,”** he said.

When the war of genocide broke out in Rwanda in 1994, Antoine was forced to flee the country. But he returned to preach in various places around the country. He preached in Kigali Central Prison (KIGALI CENTRAL PRISON), where many of the worst perpetrators of genocide have been held. Scores of men came to faith in Christ. An opportunity was given for the men to confess their sins. That time of repentance lasted for four hours. Men came forward to confess to terrible crimes. Astonished prison guards and officials watched in silence. Two weeks after the service, more than one thousand prisoners agreed to confess their crimes to the chief prosecutor of Kigali City. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This was truly evidence of Christ’s sovereignty and of His ability to change lives and to overcome sin. That same sovereignty is evidenced in our lives when we come to faith in Christ. It is evidenced when we trust in Christ’s power and choose not to be bound by anger and jealousy and unforgiveness and pride and greed.

Jesus Christ has conquered our bondage to sin. He has provided forgiveness for our sins. He has defeated our spiritual enemies. Our responsibility is to live accordingly, to trust in the power of Christ to resist sin. May we all be motivated to do just that.