

Message #7  
Colossians

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HOW TO AVOID MESSING UP OUR LIVES  
WITH WRONG IDEAS  
COLOSSIANS 2:6-10

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Columbia University (PROJECTOR ON--- COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY) was founded in 1754 in New York City as The King's College. It was the first institution of higher learning to be chartered in New York state. Its first campus was Trinity Church, which was home to an Anglican congregation. The first two presidents of the college were Anglican ministers.

As you might guess, this Ivy League school has changed its world view considerably over the years. According to its student newspaper, "**...Columbia's status as a heavily left-leaning campus has become especially conspicuous.**" The paper also noted that there is "**little ideological diversity**" to be found there. (*Columbia Spectator*, 4/5/2017) Many of us might regard that as unfortunate in that great colleges were once expected to expose their students to a variety of ideas and perspectives.

Yeonmi Park (YEONMI PARK) graduated from Columbia in 2019. She offered a different perspective as a student. She was born in North Korea. Her father was a civil servant and member of the only political party in the country. Her mom was a nurse for the army. Her father did smuggling on the side to provide for his family, which eventually landed him in prison. In 2007, at age 13, Yeonmi and her mother crossed the frozen Yalu River into China. There they fell into the hands of human traffickers who sold them into slavery. With the help of Christian missionaries they managed to escape that situation and get to northwestern China. There they walked across the Gobi Desert into Mongolia. From there they were able to get to South Korea. In 2014 Yeonmi came to the US. In 2015 she enrolled at Columbia.

So how was her experience at Columbia, this bastion of American higher learning? During orientation, she was criticized by a staff member for saying that she enjoyed classic English literature like Jane Austen. She was told, "**Did you know those writers had a colonial mindset? They were racists and bigots and are subconsciously brainwashing you.**" As she began classes, she was shocked to be exposed to what she regarded as anti-American propaganda. It reminded her of her experience in North Korea. She also was surprised that she had to learn that each student had preferred pronouns. After getting into a number of arguments with professors and students, she decided that she had to keep quiet to get good grades and graduate.

So what was her takeaway from the experience? She says, "**Literally every professor was saying the problems that we have in today's world is because of White men [and] how they colonized Africa [and] Asia, that's how they mess up everything and they are the ones who need to be blamed--- and I couldn't believe it. ... Even**

**North Korea is not this nuts. North Korea was pretty crazy, but not this crazy. ... Because I have seen oppression, I know what it looks like.”** Yeonmi, as a child, saw several people drop dead from starvation before her eyes **“These kids keep saying how they’re oppressed, how much injustice they’ve experienced. They don’t know how hard it is to be free. I literally crossed through the middle of the Gobi Desert to be free.”**

Yeonmi concludes with these observations: **“North Koreans, we don’t have Internet, we don’t have access to any of these great thinkers, we don’t know anything. But here, while having everything, people choose to be brainwashed. And they deny it. You guys have lost common sense to degree that I as a North Korean cannot even comprehend. Where are we going from here? There’s no rule of law, no morality, nothing is good or bad anymore, it’s complete chaos. I guess that’s what they want, to destroy every single thing and rebuild into a Communist paradise.”** (Foxnews, 6/14/2021) (PROJECTOR OFF)

We live in a culture that is increasingly hostile toward a Biblical world view. We live in the midst of a marketplace of ideas. There are all kinds of voices which are vying for our commitment and loyalty. But this is the way that it has been throughout much of history. In the first century Roman Empire there were many philosophies and religious ideas floating around. There were Greek philosophies; there were animistic religions; there were local gods; there was emperor worship; there was Jewish monotheism; and there was this new Christianity thing.

We have seen in our study of the New Testament Book of Colossians that the Apostle Paul was writing to a small church in the small town of Colossae (PROJECTOR ON--- COLOSSAE MAP) in western Asia Minor that was being exposed to some of these different ideas. The recipients of the letter had embraced this faith in Jesus. But there were false teachers around who were seeking to lead them astray. Paul’s letter summarizes key elements of the Christian faith. (PROJECTOR OFF) It stresses the sovereignty of Jesus. In our passage today the apostle talks about how the Colossian Christians can avoid messing up their lives with wrong ideas. What he says is as applicable to us today as it was to them in the first century.

I.

In vv. 6 & 7 of Colossians #2 (p. 984 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs) the Apostle Paul exhorts his readers to WALK IN CHRIST. In v. 6 (I. WALK IN CHRIST) he says, **“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him...”** The New Testament uses several different terms to describe the human responsibility that makes one a true Christian. The verb which is used here is “receive.” The most common term is “believe,” or “have faith.” But the New Testament also uses the expressions “call upon,” “repent,” and “be born again.”

In the Gospel of John #1 v. 12 (JOHN 1:12) the Apostle John said, **“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...”** So this receiving Jesus involves believing in Him and His claims. It requires a

recognition that we are sinners in need of a Savior. It requires believing that He died to pay the penalty for our sins and that He rose from the dead. It involves embracing and accepting Him into our lives.

This Jesus who has been “received” by the Colossian Christians is not a mythic figure who has been reinvented by this religious guy Paul. In Colossians Paul has argued that He is a real person. He is God. He is the Creator of the world. He is also a human being. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Back in #1 vv. 19 & 20 of our book he wrote, **“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”** By virtue of His death Christ has satisfied the righteous demands of a holy God. He has provided the means by which sinful human beings can be reconciled with a holy God. Thus Paul claims that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

Having received this God-man, Paul tells the Colossians that their responsibility is to walk in Him. This walking is a figure of speech. Half of the times when the Greek verb for “walk” appears in the New Testament it refers to a style of life. The Colossian Christians are to live according to the commitment that they have made to Jesus. In this particular context they are especially to avoid falling for the erroneous teaching of the false teachers at Colossae. More broadly they are to live according to the example of Jesus. (1 JOHN 2:6) In 1 John #2 v. 6 the apostle John urges Christians to **“walk in the same way in which he [Jesus] walked...”** He is our example and model.

In v. 7 in our passage Paul uses three verb forms to describe the basis for this walk in Christ. The three participles connected to “walk” are passive verb forms, which imply that these actions are done for the Colossian Christians, or done in the lives of the Colossian Christians. (PROJECTOR OFF) He writes in v. 7 in our passage, **“...rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”**

**First**, Paul speaks of his readers as having been “rooted.” It is obviously an image from horticulture. When I was a teenager, my father had a tree farm. I helped him plant thousands of trees. Most of them were blue spruce, fir, and pine trees. If these trees had decent soil and enough water, their root systems would develop. If they survived the first couple of years, they would almost always develop to maturity. The apostle is here asserting that his readers got their root systems well established. God worked in their lives and they had good teaching from those who brought them the gospel.

Now they are being built up in Christ. This is the **second** participle. This building up is an image from architecture. The implication is that there is an ongoing building project. The foundation has been laid. The building is going up. God is at work in the lives of Paul’s readers. There are teachers and pastors who are directing the work.

Then, **thirdly**, the apostle speaks of them being established in the faith. The original Greek verb was used in the field of law. It was used of guaranteeing legal contracts. So the idea here is that these Colossian Christians have been set and established in their faith. They are under contract to Christ. All of this is in accordance with, and partly the result of, the instruction which they have received.

Then in the last phrase of v. 7 the author switches from the passive voice to the active voice. This means that he is switching from things that have been done to his readers to things that they are doing themselves. He speaks of them **“abounding in thanksgiving.”**

Walking in Christ is based upon having a good foundation, a good walking surface. That surface has been provided for us who are Christians as a result of God’s work in our lives and the instruction and support that we have received from other Christians. A key responsibility that we have in the whole deal is maintaining an attitude of thanksgiving. We are to work at being thankful. .

Six times in Colossians Paul urges his readers to be thankful. Besides v. 7 in our text, Paul writes in #1 v. 12 that Christians are to **“give thanks to the Father.”** In #3 v. 15 he says that we are to **“be thankful.”** In v. 16 we are to sing **“with thankfulness in [our] hearts to God.”** According to v. 17 we are to **“[give] thanks to God the Father.”** According to #4 v. 2 we are to **“be watchful in [prayer] with thanksgiving.”**

When we focus on our own wants and desires and rights, we lose this attitude of gratitude. Instead we get jealous. We become critical of other people. We grumble. We complain. We become cynical. The end result is that our walk with Christ is affected. We become vulnerable to doubt and spiritual delusions and wrong ideas. We become susceptible to ideas of victimhood.

Matthew Henry was the pastor of a small church in England in the 1700s. He wrote a commentary on the entire Bible which is still used by many pastor types like me. On one occasion he was mugged while he was walking by himself along a country road. He wrote in his diary, **“Let me be thankful first because I was never robbed before; second, although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.”** It seems to me that Matthew Henry understood what it means to overflow with gratitude.

This attitude of gratitude is not divorced from reality. It is very much rooted in reality, because it reflects the conviction that Jesus Christ is sovereign. The things that happen in my life are part of a sovereign plan in which Christ is involved. If I cooperate in His plans and maintain the right attitude, good will ultimately come. If we want to avoid messing up our lives with wrong ideas, we will walk in Christ. A key feature of that walk will be maintaining an attitude of thanksgiving.

II.

The second thing that we will do to not mess up our lives, besides walking in Christ, is AVOID EMPTY PHILOSOPHIES. (II. AVOID EMPTY PHILOSOPHIES) That is the focus of v. 8. The apostle writes, **“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”**

This is the only place where the word “philosophy” appears in the New Testament. The literal meaning of “philosophy” is “love of wisdom.” So there is nothing inherently wrong with the subject of philosophy, if it reflects a genuine search for true wisdom. But here Paul is negative about it, perhaps because the false teachers at Colossae described their beliefs as a philosophy. Also most of the philosophies current in the Roman world had nothing to do with the wisdom that came either from Christianity or Judaism.

Paul characterizes the philosophy that he criticizes in three ways. **First**, he calls it **“empty deceit.”** It is superficially attractive. But there is little substantive content to it. It does not correspond with reality.

Such is the philosophy that is found at Columbia University, where people can determine their own gender identity to the point of denial of biological reality. If students do not recognize this personally determined gender identity, they are bad.

Two psychology professors won an award from the American Psychology Association for an article they wrote (*American Psychologist*, June, 1999) entitled “Deconstructing the Essential Father.” In it they argued, **“We do not believe that the data support the conclusion that fathers are essential to child well-being and that heterosexual marriage is the social context in which responsible fathering is most likely to occur.”** They know better than the divine owner’s manual which we have been given.

Meanwhile sociologists tell us that young men raised in fatherless households are two times more likely to be incarcerated (Breakpoint, 5/15/2013), two times more likely to suffer clinical depression, four times more likely to be expelled from school, three times more likely to repeat a grade at school, more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, and more likely to have sex before marriage than are young men who come from families with fathers around. (Breakpoint, 6/17/2016) Such are the empty philosophies we confront today. Such is the need we have to continue to encourage and honor fathers.

Today the most prominent philosophy among the ranks of the intellectual elite is something called “postmodernism.” Postmodernism holds that there is no absolute truth. Everything is relative. Therefore there are no absolute standards by which anything can be judged or evaluated.

This is nothing but empty deception. People cannot live without absolute standards and absolute truths. The result of such a philosophy is emptiness. In music we get composers like John Cage. One of his compositions is entitled “4-33.” He sits down at a

piano with hands held above the keyboard. After four minutes and thirty-three seconds, he gets up and walks away. No music is ever played.

In art postmodernism produces little of value. Several years ago in England the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts held a competition in which an award was given to a watercolor entitled *Rhythm of the Trees*. The judges determined that this watercolor showed **“a certain quality of color balance, composition, and technical skill.”** The painter turned out to be a four-year-old child whose mother submitted the painting as a joke.

Paul first calls the philosophy which he has in mind empty deceit. Paul, **secondly**, says that this philosophy is **“according to human tradition.”** Literally, the term “tradition” referred to something which had been handed down. Tradition can be good, bad, or indifferent. It is bad when it contradicts God’s Word. Jesus criticized the tradition of the Pharisees when their rules were placed on a level above God’s commandments. For example, the Pharisees said that healing could not be done on the Sabbath. Jesus was often healing people on the Sabbath. So He was bad in their eyes.

Probably the false teachers at Colossae claimed that their philosophy had been around for a long time. The apostle gives us limited information about the nature of these beliefs. Some scholars think that it was a Gentile belief system. Some see elements of Judaism in it. Some think that there were elements from both backgrounds. Both Judaism and Gentile belief systems had a respect for tradition.

But tradition is only as good as its basis in reality. There are people in some parts of the South Pacific who had a long tradition of cannibalism. Most of us, I trust, would recognize that cannibalism isn’t a very good tradition. So tradition is of limited value. It is only as good as its correspondence to reality and promotion of virtue. When we are dealing with traditions about God and the origin and destiny of life, tradition has value only when it reflects a true origin in God.

Then, **thirdly**, Paul characterizes the philosophy which he has in mind as being **“according to the elemental spirits of the world.”** The meaning of that phrase is uncertain. Many commentators think that it is a reference to spiritual beings. Many Greek philosophers said that the universe was comprised of four elements: earth, air, water, and fire. Some thought that there were spiritual forces connected with these elements.

One commentator (Douglas Moo) says that every use of this phrase “elemental spirits of the world” in Paul’s day referred to this believe in the fundamental elements of earth: air, water, and fire. A first century Jewish writer by the name of Philo wrote, **“Some nations have made divinities of the four elements, earth and water, and air and fire. Others, of the sun and moon, and of the other planets and fixed stars.”** (*On the Decalogue* 53) If Paul has this way of thinking in mind, he could be saying that the Colossian philosophy is about worship of these things.

The main point is that Christians should avoid cults, philosophies, and religions that come along with promises of new insights, deeper knowledge, and instant spirituality. The Christian life is a walk. It is a growth process. One way to recognize false philosophies, false religions, and cults is to notice if they diminish the sovereignty and supreme position of Christ.

III.

Thus in vv. 9 & 10 Paul tells his readers to FOCUS ON CHRIST. (III. FOCUS ON CHRIST) We are to make Him central to our direction in life. In v. 9 he writes, “**For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.**” We know for sure that a century after the time of Paul the philosophy of Gnosticism was present at Colossae. This Gnosticism taught that spiritual fullness was divided among spiritual beings that descended from God. The Gnostics pictured God up here. He supposedly had created a series of spiritual beings that stood between Him and the earth. Those closest to Him were the most spiritual and good. Those closest to the earth were of less importance and value. For matter is evil, and spirit is good.

Paul’s remarks here may mean that some of this Gnostic thinking was around in his day. For Paul claims that all of the fullness of deity dwells in one being, who is Christ. He specifically adds that this fullness of deity dwells in Christ in bodily form. That was inconceivable to Gnostics. For matter is evil. Deity could not be too closely connected with matter. Paul denies that. Jesus Christ was, and is, a physical being.

Notice that Paul uses a present tense verb. He writes after the time of Christ’s resurrection and ascension. Yet he asserts that the fullness of deity currently resides in Christ in bodily form. Thus Paul is claiming that Christ is fully God and fully man.

Many Christians don’t realize that Jesus Christ in His current situation in heaven is still a human being. When He ascended into heaven, He did not lose His humanity. He is still fully God and fully man. His human body is different than it once was. For He has a resurrection body. The gospels show us that after the resurrection from the dead, Jesus was still recognizable. He had wounds in His hands and His side. He could eat and talk.

But there were some different things about this body also. He could suddenly appear in a locked room. He could suddenly disappear from among them. The Scriptures indicate that we who are Christians will some day also be raised from the dead and be given a resurrection body that will be something like the resurrection body of Jesus.

In v. 10 Paul adds, “**...and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority...**” Literally he says that Christians have been made “full.” The author uses a verb form of the same word for “fullness” in v. 10. Christ has the fullness of deity. Now we believers have been made full.

In John #1 v. 16 (JOHN 1:16) the apostle wrote, “**For from his [Christ’s] fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.**”

Besides receiving grace, does this mean that we have the fullness of deity, too? Are we little gods? No! John Calvin (JOHN CALVIN QUOTE) explained it this way: **“You are made full’ does not mean the perfection of Christ is transfused into us, but that there are in Him resources from which we may be filled, that nothing be wanting in us.”** Because of our relationship with Christ, we have everything that we really need. We have security and significance. We are in right relationship with the God of the universe who loves us and cares for us.

(2 PETER 1:2) In 2 Peter #1 vv. 2 & 3 the Apostle Peter writes to another group of Christians, **“May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 PETER 1:3) His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.”**

Furthermore, v. 10 in our passage reminds us that this Christ is sovereign over every spiritual power and every human power in the universe. He is sovereign over cults and religions and New Agers and Gnostics and college professors and demons and difficult situations. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We Christians are constantly bombarded with wrong ideas. We are exposed to them on TV, at work, at school, in books, on the computer, and from friends. We are exposed to other religions and philosophies and cults. We are told directly and indirectly that our security lies in money, in pension funds, in government protection, in legal rights, and in family members. We are told that significance comes from our job, from our money, from our positions, from our looks, from our athletic ability, from our ethnic identity, and from our gender identity. We face temptations and trials in life, all of which have the potential to mess up our lives if we buy into wrong ideas.

We have a variety of problems and challenges represented in our congregation. We have had a lot of deaths and health challenges and financial difficulties and addictions and isolation caused by the pandemic. Our world offers a variety of philosophies about how we should deal with these challenges. It has a lot of perspectives about what we should think of fatherhood. The main issue revolves around the question of who is in charge, and where is the source of truth. The Bible says that what we ought to do is walk in Christ, avoid empty philosophies, and focus on Christ. He is sovereign. If we keep our faith solidly based in Him, He will meet our deepest needs.