

## **Colossians: Rooted in His Triumph**

**Colossians 2:16-23**

By [Kevin Phipps](#)

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If you're using one of the church's Bibles you'll want to turn to page 984. We are, like Sean said earlier, continuing our series on the book of Colossians and the theme that we're pulling out is "The Preeminence of Christ." And so tonight we're going to be looking at chapter 2 beginning in verse 6 all the way through verse 15. And just a little background just to catch you up - false teachers are trying to infiltrate the church at Colossae. They are promising a fullness of experience claiming that the Colossian Christians are missing out on. As we go through the rest of the book we find out that part of what they're promising is a greater level of freedom from sin through certain practices. They have a program that they want to put forward that will help the Colossians with their complacency or maybe their half-heartedness and so that they would be people of zeal. So in confronting the teaching of the false teachers the apostle Paul, throughout the book, calls the Colossians and calls us back to the basics of the Christian faith, calls us back to the basics of the Gospel, back to the basics of who Christ is. But he's not calling the church to remain at the basis. It says, Dick Lucas puts it, he wants the Colossians to understand that all growth in the Christian life is consistent with the beginnings of the Christian life. So that's what he wants them to know. He says, "I want you to grow in the faith but it's going to be consistent with the Gospel that you first received," and he wants to show them how the false teachers have deviated from that and the danger of that.

So before we pray and look at God's Word, let me outline what I want us to see from Colossians chapter 2:6-15 this evening. In verses 6 through 7 I want us to see the call to faithfulness. In verse 8 I want us to see the warning. And then verses 9 through 15 we will look at the fullness of the Gospel. Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

*Our heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. And Lord, while we do not, there are years and years separating us from the situation the Colossians were facing, Lord this Word is relevant to us tonight. It is powerful. So give us ears to hear, give us eyes to see. Let us embrace it by faith and see the glories of Christ that we may love Him more and grow in His likeness. We ask for Your Spirit's help tonight and we ask in Your Son's name. Amen.*

Let's hear God's Word from Colossians chapter 2 beginning in verse 6:

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to the human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. 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. 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, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. 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, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Amen, and that ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its truth on all of our hearts.

### **Real Change?**

Have you ever thought what it might be like to go into the witness protection program? The US Marshals, they have this deal where if you come forward and testify as a witness to a crime they can provide protection for you for the rest of your life. And what that means is that if you testify then you have to get in their program and you essentially leave behind all that you know. You leave behind your whole identity, your credit history, your back story, and you start over under their protection. There's a pretty famous story about a former mob hitman named Frank Cullotta. In 1982 some of his, let's call them associates, crossed him and he decided to get them back and come into compliance and to help out the federal government to witness against his fellow mobsters and so they put him into the witness protection program. Now the only reason that we know about this is that he felt comfortable enough to start talking to some journalists about this in the last couple of years because he said all his former associates are now dead or sentenced to life in prison and of course he doesn't go by the name Frank anymore. But what was interesting is that you can take the mobster out of Chicago but you can't take Chicago out of the mobster. Listen to what he says. "For all the new names and identity cards and the made up backstory, Cullotta couldn't alter his basic demeanor" - this is the journalist writing about

him. Cullotta told the journalist in a strong Chicago accent, and here's a quote, he says, "You hear my voice?" - I'm not even going to bother to try to do the accent! "Can you imagine me living in," and this is a real quote, "Biloxi, Mississippi? Do you think I would fit there? Or Texas? Of course, people would look at me and say, 'You're a Yankee. You're a gangster. You sound like one of those gangsters on the movies,'" Cullotta went on, "So I tried to dress down. I wore ball caps, jeans, tennis shoes, stuff that I would never wear in my life. I was just trying to fit in but I still had the accent and the demeanor. How could I walk and carry myself which is almost impossible to change? It's impossible for me to change."

They might have tried to give him a new identity but it was the same old Frank. This is something we all face. We all have things in our life that we wish we could change about ourselves, right? There are things that are beyond just idiosyncrasies or personality quirks but if you're a Christian here tonight there's probably areas of sin and areas where you need to grow in holiness and you would like some help with change. One of the things that the false teachers will see in Colossians chapter 2 are coming in and saying to the Colossian church, "If you do this it's going to result in change in your life." If the false teachers were around today they might market their teaching like something, I don't know, maybe "Seven Steps to a Fuller Spiritual Life," or maybe they might market the program as, "Thirty Days to Breaking Old Habits." And we'll see that come through in Colossians chapter 2.

What Paul wants the Colossians to know and he wants us to know is that the false teachers cannot deliver real change. And more importantly, if the Colossians are to embrace their principles, to embrace their program, to embrace their teaching, it will not lead to greater spirituality but in fact they will become taken captive themselves by the false teaching and drawn away from Christ. So Paul wants Christians to know that it is because you are united to Christ you're no longer who you once were. So beginning our passage tonight Paul instructs Christians on living out their new identity in Christ. What does it mean for them to live? So there's the idea that in Colossians chapter 1 he's been giving them the indicative. This is what's true about Christ. This is what's true about you. And now beginning in our passage tonight he starts giving them imperatives. He starts saying, "So therefore, do this. Therefore live like this. This is how you live it out."

## **I. The Call to Faithfulness**

So we'll begin with the first imperative; it's in verse 6. We'll look at verse 6 and 7 tonight first - the call to faithfulness. The call to faithfulness. Colossians 2:6-7 - "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him." "So walk in him" is the first imperative in the book of Colossians. It's the command for them to walk in Christ. What does it mean saying that? You have received Jesus as

your Lord so walk accordingly. What is he pointing them to? He's saying that your belief will influence your behavior. The word "to walk" throughout the epistles of Paul is a reference to your lifestyle. He's saying you have accepted, embraced Jesus as the Lord of all and so walk accordingly, walk in that way. His Lordship shows up in every area of your life. It's not merely a profession but it means striving to apply that everywhere. He's telling the Colossians, "You've professed Him as Lord. Now walk in Him. Your behavior will match your belief; your lifestyle will match that profession of His Lordship."

But he doesn't just leave us there saying, "Walk in Him." In verse 7 he gives us four participles that helps us kind of work that out. What does it mean to walk in Him? What does it mean to live in the fullness of His Lordship in every area of our life? Well he tells us it's about being rooted; it's about being built up. It's about being established; it's about abounding. Now this list resembles what we saw earlier in our study a couple of weeks back in chapter 1 beginning in verse 10. You don't have to turn there but I'll read it for us. In Colossians 1 verse 10, beginning in verse 10 says, "So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for all endurance with patience and joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints." So there it begins with walking in a manner worthy of the Lord and then he tells them the horticultural image. He says that you'll bear fruit in every good work and then it ends with the note of thanksgiving to the Father. Well in our passage in verse 7 tonight it begins prior to verse 7, "so walk in Him," verse 7, "rooted," - there's another similar image - as to bearing fruit, one that depicts plant life. And then it closes with what? "Abounding in thanksgiving." Abounding in thanksgiving. This is what it means to walk in Him.

### **Walking in Christ**

So how do we go about walking in Him? The key is there in being rooted and built up in Him. It kind of feels like Paul is just throwing metaphors out there just seeing if one will stick. Saying, "Okay, you need to be rooted. You don't get that? Alright you need to be built up." Because he goes from talking about plants to talking about architecture. He goes from talking about something going in the ground to something being built with materials on top. Now it's not haphazard what Paul is doing here when he's telling us to be rooted and to be built up. This imagery is imagery that the Bible also uses to talk about the house of God. This is imagery, metaphors, that the Bible uses to talk about the temple of God, God's house, God's dwelling place among His people. Listen to what David wrote. In Psalm 52:8 David says, "But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God." He says, "I am rooted in the house of God and bearing fruit." The psalmist in Psalm 92 verses 12 through 14 says, "The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord. They flourish in the courts of our God." So the image of being

rooted in the Bible is about being rooted in the house of God.

### **Being Built Up as the House of God**

But also the Bible speaks about being built up, but being built up as the house of God. Ephesians 2:19-22 - "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." He says, "Christians, you used to be outside the household of God. Now you're part of the very structure. Now you're being built up together on the foundation of the apostles, the prophets, with Christ being the cornerstone." So as Paul is preparing the Colossians to deal with the false teachers he says, "You know what's key? What's key is that you find your place in the house of God, it's that you put down roots in the church, that you're built up together. If you're going to remain faithful to the true Gospel, if you're going to remain faithful to the apostolic message, it's not going to be something you do on your own. You need to be rooted in the house of God, built up together."

### **Established in the Faith**

And then the rest of verse 7 says, "established in the faith just as you were taught." He's once again pounding home to the Colossians that, "Hey, you were taught the right thing. You were taught by Epaphras when he planted the church *the* apostolic message. Don't deviate from it but be strengthened in it. Walk according to it. And reject what the false teachers are bringing." The goal of being rooted, built up, and established in the truth by the ministry of the church is that, as the covenant community, we would be abounding in thanks to the Father. That's what it says there - "abounding in thanksgiving." Rooted, planted, established in the house of God and giving thanks to the Father. God's plan for us to remain faithful to Christ and to the Gospel is the church. It's one another. It's being built up together.

We have to ask ourselves, "What is our posture towards the church?" Now I know this is the Wednesday night crowd and y'all have gone out of your way to be here to pray together and hear God's Word together on a Wednesday night, but I'll still ask you, "What is your posture towards the church? Is the church something that you fit into your schedule and your spirituality, your faith is something that happens and the church just comes alongside and assists you in that?" No, the church is central to our growth in Christ and to being who we are called to be in Him. Walking in Him means you are planted in the church. So that's the first thing - the call to faithfulness. And that's almost the center of the book. The call to faithfulness.

## **II. The Warning**

The next thing is, we'll look at it in one verse, verse 8, and this verse is quite the doozy. There's the warning. This is the first of three warnings in chapter 2. In verse 16 we are warned not to let the false teachers condemn us. In verse 18 we're warned not to let the false teachers disqualify us. Here we are warning not to be taken captive by their teaching. It's another imperative that verse 8 begins with. "See to it that no one takes you captive." It begins with that command, that exhortation - "See to it that no one takes you captive." Paul is ready to address and characterize and describe the false teachers directly. We don't get all the content of their teaching here but listen to Paul's description of their teaching. He says, "You take captive by philosophy, empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ." The word "captive" there in the original it has the image of someone plundering a cargo ship. It has the idea of not just that but taking not just goods and products but people as well. So he's saying, "Watch out. Do not let them enslave you through their error. Do not let them come and take hold of your mind."

### **Beware False Teaching of Human Tradition**

So what is he saying about their teaching? He says, "Well, don't be taken captive by their philosophy or empty deceit." Another way of putting it would be like this possibly. "See that no one takes you captive by means of empty and deceitful philosophy." He's warning them about the philosophy of the false teachers and he says it's empty and it's deceitful. Now philosophy in Paul's day isn't used the same way that it's used today. It had a broader use back then than it does now. It basically means "knowledge" back then. It doesn't refer to the discipline of philosophy. Paul is not disputing the discipline of philosophy. So you don't have to go and find a college student who's a philosophy major and tell them if you want to be a Christian you can't be a philosophy major. That's not what Paul's saying here. He's talking about the knowledge that the false teachers are claiming to have. He's saying, "Don't be taken captive by that." Why is he condemning it? Well he's saying that that knowledge is deeply flawed because it doesn't have Christ at the center. He's not preeminent in all things. He's not the starting point. He's not the framework. It's knowledge based on what? Well it says it's based on "human tradition." It's based on human tradition and not God's special revelation.

### **Beware False Teaching of Worldly Wisdom**

And then he says that's knowledge that is "influenced by the elemental spirits of the world." Plenty of ink has been spilt on trying to figure out what this verse right here in this part, "elemental spirits," means - "of the world." There's a lot of theories, a lot of things that come out there, and very brilliant and godly men disagree with one another. There's basically three ways to understand what could be going on here. Paul could be saying elements of the physical world

itself, elemental teachings of the world, or elemental spirits of the world. And even though brilliant men disagree, Paul's main point in calling the teaching of the elemental spirits here, their philosophy, their knowledge, the main point isn't lost on us because he says it's "of the world." So whatever it's in a direct reference to Paul's saying it's of the world. Its source of knowledge is from the world; it's not from God. That is what Paul tells us. And finally he closes with it's just not according to Christ. He gives a negative evaluation of their teaching and then he says, most importantly, it's just not according to Christ.

Now if you take this warning seriously in verse 8 it's not going to make you popular in our culture so affirm that there is true truth that is true for everyone and that we don't get to decide what is true for us is going against current popular thought. But more importantly we could apply it to our lives as Christians that the warning here is that, "What ways have the thoughts of the world come in and tempted to trump the knowledge of Christ?" As Christians we don't get veto power when it comes to the Scripture. Have you ever heard someone say, "I know the Bible says, but..." And then fill in the blank with their explanation. I've said it; you've said it at some point. And this is warning us saying to be careful that we take every thought captive to Christ and we don't become captive by the thoughts of this world. The warning is to reject all thinking that doesn't begin with Christ being preeminent in all things. So there in verse 8 is the warning.

### **III. The Fullness of the Gospel**

And finally, in the remaining verses, 9 through 15, in light of the false teaching, in light of the call to faithfulness and the warning to not be captive, Paul presents the fullness of the Gospel. He says the knowledge of the Gospel is superior to what these false teachers, the philosophies of this world. And the basis of the superiority of the Gospel is the preeminence of Christ. Beginning in verse 9 he says, "For in him the fullness of deity dwells bodily." He's reminding them of what he told them in chapter 1 of Colossians in the Christ-hymn. That Christ is above all, that all is for Christ, and all is through Christ. And here he says the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form. It's helpful here to see that and once again Paul is picking up on something that's close to temple imagery. Where did God dwell with His people? God dwelled with His people in the Old Testament in the temple in the Holy of Holies and now that has been replaced. It was meant to be a type of Christ - the fullness of deity dwelling in bodily form among His people. And so Paul tells the Colossians and he tells us that you have the fullness because you have Christ. And notice what he says in the following verse. He says Christ is filled with the fullness of God and you too, verse 10, he says, "you have been filled, you are filled, you are filled with the fullness." And then he goes on to lay out what that fullness is.

We see in the remaining verses, beginning in verse 11 through verse 15 that the good news of the Gospel, that the basics of the faith, that the power of the

Gospel is that Christ has freed us from our sinful nature, that Christ has paid our debt, and that Christ has conquered our enemy. In verses 11 through 13 Paul almost surprisingly brings up the subject of circumcision. If you were reading this letter just for the first time and you weren't familiar with what was coming up next you'd probably think, "That seems odd. All of a sudden we're talking about circumcision. We've just been talking about false teachers, we're talking about being faithful, being planted in the church - why is he bringing this up?" And what he's pointing to is that what circumcision was meant to represent. You see the physical act of both baptism and circumcision have a relationship. The physical act of baptism has replaced the physical act of circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace but for Christians Paul wants to say that, "You still receive a circumcision." What does he tell us in verse 11? He says, "In him also you were circumcised with the circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ." He says when you're in Him, when you're united to Christ, the flesh has been cut off.

### **Freed from Slavery of Sin**

What does he mean by that? He means that the sinful nature has been stripped away. Its power to enslave you has been cut off because you're in Christ. Here there is a very personal, subjective side of the Gospel where our corruption from the fall is cut off. For the believer, the simple impulse has been stripped of its power and dominion in our lives. We are still subject to the influence of the flesh but we no longer have to live under its slavery. Why? Because of what Christ has done, because we are united to Him. We are united to the power of His death and resurrection in verse 12. "Having been buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful workings of God who raised him from the dead."

### **Freed from the Flesh and the Debt of Sin**

Then picking up in verse 14 we see the fullness of the Gospel is not just that you're freed from the slavery of sinful nature, freed from the flesh. We see that Christ has paid our debt. In verse 14, "by canceling the record of the debt that stood against us with its legal demands, this he set aside nailing it to the cross." Here's the good news of the Gospel - the forgiveness of our sins. Believer, if you are in Christ tonight you are forgiven. You had an IOU to your Creator. You had an IOU where you owed Him perfect obedience and you failed to give Him what was owed and all you had was a note that said, "Here's my debt." And the Law of God, with its legal demand, stood opposed to you saying, "Yep, this is your debt." And Christ took it and paid your debt at the cross. If the circumcision of our hearts is something that's subjective and spiritual that happens to us, here is the objective paying of our debt, the legal demands. It's been nailed to the cross.

### **Christ's Triumph over His Enemies**



And finally in verse 15, "You disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him." Through the power of the cross our debt is taken care of but our enemy is conquered. Christ has conquered our enemy. The picture here is a triumphant Roman general riding with his chariot and his troops leading vanquished kings and his enemies behind him, bringing the spoils of war. We were fighting for the wrong kingdom. We were complicit with the powers of darkness and under the ruler of this age. And at the cross, our enemy, the tyrant, the evil one, who had every right to us because of our rebellion against God, was conquered. He was vanquished. He was stripped of his power. He was stripped of the power to accuse you before God. And in some ways we are the spoils of war that Christ has won. We are the treasure, His treasure, that He has taken from the enemy as He has conquered him - the fullness of the Gospel and how it shapes our identity.

### **A Call to Pray for Gospel-Rootedness**

What does that mean for us tonight? Well it means for us tonight that because of the fullness of the Gospel we can go to our God with confidence in prayer knowing that the evil one has been defeated at the cross, knowing that our debt has been paid, knowing that He has made us alive in Christ. That's what it means for us tonight as we go to the Lord in prayer. We can pray with confidence. And let me also say, let's pray tonight, let's pray for each other, let's pray that we are rooted and built up. We pray for this church that as we hear the Word of God taught we would be established and strengthened. Let us also pray for our covenant children, for our college students, for our young adults, for our high school and junior high students, let's pray that the attempts of the enemy to captivate them, to pull them away from Christ, to enslave them by the philosophies of this world, that the Gospel would have victory over that as well. Let me pray for us.

*O Lord God, we thank You, Lord, for who we are in You. Lord, we boldly proclaim that Jesus is Lord of all. Help us to walk accordingly. Help us to walk in Him, and all the privileges and all the power and all the glory of what was purchased for us at the cross. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

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