

COLOSSIANS: THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST

Part 4: “Made Alive Together”

Colossians 2:6-15

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Sunday, May 9, 2021 (Easter Season and Mother’s Day)

Scripture Reading

“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 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” (Colossians 2:6–15, ESV).

Introduction

Christianity is built on the foundation of the supernatural. Jesus was not wounded on the cross but later managed to survive. Jesus truly died – and he truly rose again

In the same way, Christianity is not about bad people becoming better people. It is about dead people becoming living people. Christianity is not about moral resuscitation. It is about spiritual resurrection.

The Christian gospel is nothing less than the invitation to truly participate in the supernatural, resurrection life of Jesus Christ. We don’t have faith in Jesus so that we can work hard to become marginally more ethical people. We have faith in Jesus so that we can be “Made Alive Together” by the power of God.

In today’s passage, the Apostle Paul gives us one of the clearest pictures of what it means to take hold of and participate in this spiritual new life. We take hold of this new life in three ways: by *1.) Walking in Christ, 2.) Walking in Freedom, and 3.) Walking in Victory.*

Exposition

1.) Walking in Christ

Paul is writing a letter to a newly planted church in the town of Colossae. External cultural forces are pressing in upon this church. Those forces want to distort and co-opt the Christian gospel to make it something more acceptable and less radical to the surrounding culture.

Against these pressures, Paul wants to remind the Colossian Christians of the glory and supremacy of Christ Jesus. He wants to inspire the Colossians to live in a way in which they are more astonished with Jesus than anything else in this world.

A major focus of the first chapter of Colossians centers around Paul unfolding and exploring the brilliant truth of Christ's glory. Now in chapter 2, he wants to show how this truth about Christ should fundamentally reframe the way followers of Christ see themselves and live their lives.

Beginning in verse 6, the Apostle commands, **"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him"** (Col 2:6).

Here, to "walk" (περιπατέω) refers to a manner of life; a manner of living. "In him/in Christ" (ἐν αὐτῷ) is a statement of identity; a statement of who we are in our innermost being.

Paul wants his readers to know *Christian living flows from Christian identity*. If we want to live as Christ has called us to live, we must constantly remind ourselves of what is true about Jesus Christ and what is true about *us* because we have been united to Jesus Christ.

Because here is the sad truth: we can receive Christ but still walk in another way of life. We can receive Christ – and his grace and salvation – yet still, place our identity in other things.

Thus, we can fuse our identity with our jobs (and whether or not we are a success). We can fuse our identity with our kids (and what our kids' accomplishments or lack of accomplishments says about our value). We can fuse our identity with our wealth, our schools, our political parties, or even our favorite sports teams.

And these are not necessarily bad things. Our jobs are good. Our children are gifts from the Lord that are good. And – twenty-five years ago – the Dallas Cowboys were good. But these things are not intended to be the foundation for our identities.

Why is this? The Bible tells us that we are created in the image and likeness of God. We are designed to bear the image of God. And only in bearing the image of Christ will we discover what it means to be truly human (cf. 1 Cor 15:49).

Thus, Paul tells us that we must be “...*rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught...*” (Col 2:7a).

In telling us to be “rooted” in Christ, Paul is creating a word picture of a tree with deep roots in the earth (cf. Ps 1:1-3).

I have two beautiful oak trees on my front lawn. And every year or two, I have to call a tree trimmer to trim the branches, so they don’t get out of control. And every time that tree-trimmer comes out, he reminds me that what you see with the branches and canopy above is usually mirrored by unseen roots beneath the ground. In other words, roots are designed to go deep.

In the same way, Paul is saying, “Let Christ be your foundation, your stability, your source of nourishment, and the deepest source of your identity.”

Typically, when a person starts a career, gets married, has kids, and buys a home in a particular town, he or she will say, I’ve decided to “lay down my roots.” There might have been a time when such a person could move or change jobs with ease, but now that person is deeply networked, interwoven, and planted inside one community.

In the same way, Paul is saying, “Let your identity in Christ be your home-base. Let it be where you return over and over again. Let it be where you find and cultivate community. Let it be where you find your rest and restoration.”

By saying “built up” in Christ, Paul is also saying, “Let Christ be your aim and your trajectory of growth and maturity.”

For a moment, I want you to think about the greatest goal you are pursuing. Is it to have professional success? Is it to have the body image you want? Is it to possess a certain amount of wealth? Is it to be acknowledged as smart or important?

It’s important to have goals and aspirations. But it is also important to know that God’s greatest goal for us is “*to be conformed to the image of his Son*” (Rom 8:29). And we are called to actively participate in that work of transformation that God desires to do within us to make us more like Jesus (cf. Rom 12:1-2).

Christ’s redemption accomplishes the work of salvation. Yet, it is our responsibility to appropriate the benefits of salvation. Christ gives us a new identity. Yet, it is our responsibility to walk in that new identity.

How do you practically walk in that new identity? We put Christ before us in our thoughts and habits. This is why it is so crucial to read Scripture and even memorize Scripture. Put the truth of God before your mind and heart on a regular basis. Let Christian community and corporate worship provide a weekly rhythm of spiritual formation and spiritual rest.

This is why I believe Paul ends this command with the phrase, “...*abounding in thanksgiving*” (Col 2:7b).

Gratitude is not just a good idea that will make you a happier person, although it is no coincidence that the happiest people are often the most thankful. Gratitude is a spiritual discipline that is *necessary* for growth in Christ.

We are called people to an intentional, purposeful, and regular practice of recounting God’s faithfulness as a way of igniting our worship and our love. We are called to remind our hearts of God’s truth against the deception of the world. We are called to remember who Christ is and what he has done that we might *abound* in thanksgiving.

This is why thanksgiving has historically been one of the most ancient and enduring aspects of Christian worship. In fact, the Greek word for “thanksgiving” is “eucharistia” (εὐχαριστία). It is the word from which we get the term “eucharist,” another word for “Holy Communion” or “the Lord’s Supper.” Because every time God’s people partake in the Lord’s Supper, we provoke our hearts to say, “Thank you, Jesus. Thank you for loving me when I was unlovable. Thank you for giving me your righteousness. Thank you for giving me a new identity.”

2.) Walking in Freedom

Look at verse 8 in our text. Paul says, “*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*” (Col 2:8).

There are forces at play in this world that are very much opposed to God’s people growing and maturing in Christ. For this reason, Paul warns Christians not to become captive to “philosophy and empty deceit.”

Now if you are in tune with the news or the world of academia or the world of politics, I imagine you would be able to name two or three ideologies or worldviews that are openly hostile toward Christians within culture. What I hope you can see from this text is that this is not a new phenomenon at all. Paul is not writing in the 21st century. He is writing in the 1st century. As long as the gospel has existed, it has been opposed by external cultural forces.

However, Paul also shows us that there is a truly spiritual aspect and agency behind these forces. In fact, as we look at this passage as a whole, we can see that the “philosophy and empty deceit” that Paul describes are connected to “the elemental spirits of the world” (Col 2:8) as well as the “rulers and authorities” (Col 2:10; 15).

Who are these “rulers and authorities”? Well, in other parts of Paul’s writings, it becomes apparent that Paul views these rulers and authorities as spiritual beings that are set against God and his people: “*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*” (Eph 6:12).

In passages like Ephesians 6 and Colossians 2, Paul is describing what we might call “spiritual warfare.” Now as those who live in the post-Enlightenment Western world, we can be somewhat biased against the notions of spiritual beings and the unseen realm. Nevertheless, “spiritual warfare” is something that Bible says is true about the nature of reality.

Colossians 2 seems to suggest that these spiritual forces weaponize the worldviews, traditions, and institutions of culture in such a way as to get God’s people to live outside of their primary identity in Christ. Today, whether it is materialism, progressivism, nationalism, political extremism, or simply radical individualism, there are still a host of worldly, demonic ideologies that would desire to press upon the church until it compromises its call.

And even the most secular among us intuitively recognize the *spiritual* aspect of such forces around us. We talk about the “*spirit*” of the age. We say things like the Nazis were “*possessed*” by evil. Op-ed writers tell us about how corporate greed is “*diabolical*.” We hear politicians talk about how each political contest is “*a battle of the soul of our nation*.”

Deep in our bones, we recognize that there is a spiritual nature to the reality around us. And Paul wants Christians to know that – whether you see them or not, whether you believe them or not – there are “rulers and authorities” and “powers and principalities” who would like to seize and ensnare God’s people.

But although these spiritual forces are real and their power is great, the power of Jesus is infinitely greater! As Paul declares, “*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*” (Col 2:9–10).

Now, as I have said in previous sermons, we don’t know the exact nature of the problem in Colossae. But we do know that at least some of the problem had to do with Jewish traditions being imposed on Gentiles who had converted to faith in Jesus. Specifically, it seems that there was a notion going around that if you couldn’t really be a part of the people of God unless you were circumcised. And this was distorting the gospel in Colossae. Basically, there was pressure to trust in circumcision instead of Jesus for salvation.

So how can the Colossian Christians walk in freedom against this cultural pressure? Paul’s solution is brilliant. He encourages the Colossians to remember their baptism: “*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*” (Col 2:11–12).

During the time of the Old Testament, circumcision was the sign that you were a part of God’s people Israel. But Paul is saying now baptism is the sign that you are a part of

God's people. Whereas circumcision was a sign that people inherited because of their ethnicity, baptism is a sign that you have inherited the resurrection life of Jesus through *faith!*

Baptism is a symbol that communicates that we have been united with both the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's why whenever I baptize a person, whenever they are lowered into the water, I say, "Buried with Christ in death." And when they are lifted out of the water, I say, "Raised with Christ to newness of life!"

But from a spiritual perspective, baptism is also a declaration of our spiritual allegiance to Christ. It is a ceremony that confirms we are no longer under the spiritual dominion of the "rulers and authorities." That's why, in some Christian traditions, before a person is baptized, a pastor or priest will ask them, "Dost thou renounce Satan and all his works?"

For this reason, Martin Luther, the great protestant reformer, taught his congregation to cross themselves in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as their first act when they sat up from bed in the morning. He recommended this practice as a spiritual discipline by which we can remember our baptism and our spiritual freedom in Christ.

As author Tish Harrison Warren writes: "As Christians, we wake each morning as those who are baptized. We are united with Christ and the approval of the Father is spoken over us. We are marked from our first waking moment by an identity that is given to us by grace: an identity that is deeper and more real than any other identity we will don that day."¹

3.) Walking in Victory

Paul did not invent the terms "rulers and authorities" (τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας). In fact, these terms have a rich heritage that go all the way back to the Old Testament. It's a fascinating subject that I have researched in great detail.

But to make a very complex matter very simple, it seems that these "rulers and authorities" once held spiritual dominion over people, especially those who were from gentile (non-Jewish) nations.

Paul gets at this idea in Ephesians when he says, "*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience*" (Eph 2:1–2).

But now, something has changed. The powers have been dethroned, delegitimized, and disarmed. How? Through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

¹ Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), 61.

Look at the final verses of today's passage: *"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"* (Col 2:13–15).

The power of death was perhaps the greatest weapon of the rulers and authorities of this world (cf. 1 Cor 2:6,8). But by his cross and empty grave, Jesus defeated death! He is now Christ the Victor! He is now Christ the Ascended King! Sin and Satan and death have no dominion over Christ. And for all who are united to Christ by faith, sin and Satan and death have no claim over us either!

However, the rulers and authorities still exist. Our spiritual enemies have been defeated, but they are not yet surrendered. The D-Day of Christ's resurrection has broken the power of the enemy. But the V-Day of Christ's return has not yet come.

Until then, it is crucial for Christians to know who they are in Christ so that they can walk in the victory of Christ. Maybe you once felt enslaved by your sin and temptations. But if you are a Christian, you no longer have to obey the sin as your master.

You can tell your sin, "You have no rightful claim over me anymore. You once had access to my thought life; now I deny you that access. I don't have to listen to you. My life, my thoughts, my behavior, and my habits are no longer bound to you."

As Paul says in Romans, *"So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness"* (Rom 6:11–13).

You may be here, you are not yet a Christian, and you feel bound by sin. Today, I want to invite you to receive liberation in Christ. Maybe you are here, and you are a Christian, but you are living in an identity outside of Christ. Today, I invite you to remember who you are in Christ.

For us all, Redeemer Christian Church, may we learn to know, embrace, and rest in all that Christ has accomplished for us. May we walk in Christ. May we experience freedom in Christ. And may we rest in the victory of Christ.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read Colossians 2:6-15 and summarize the big ideas of this passage in your own words.
2. What does it mean to “walk in Christ, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith” (Col 2:6-7)? Talk about the concepts “rooted” and “built up” and what these phrases mean. Why does Paul mention “thanksgiving” at the end of verse 7?
3. Instead of allowing themselves to be taken “captive by philosophy and empty deceit,” Paul encourages Christians to remember their baptism (Col 2:8-12). In what ways do you see “philosophy and empty deceit” attempting to compel Christians to live outside of their identity in Christ today? Why is remembering one’s baptism such a vital remedy to such temptations?
4. What does Colossians 2:13-15 tell us that Christ accomplished? How should this truth give us hope?