

Walking in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] So, first of all, a warning. We're going to look at this a bit in reverse order. We're going to start in verse 8. But Paul is, as I said, writing to new Christian converts, and he's warning them about an ever-present danger that all Christians are going to face over the course of their lives.

He says in verse 8, see to it that no one takes you captive. And that's a word that would refer to somebody who was captured in war and then forced into slavery.

So, you might translate this as see to it that no one enslaves you. By philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

I want to make it clear that Paul is not saying that philosophy itself is bad. He's not condemning the discipline of philosophy. And many of you are well-read in philosophy, and you know that I'm a great lover of philosophy.

And so, that's not what Paul's talking about here. Paul was actually also well-versed in the philosophies of his day. This word has a much broader meaning than what we would typically think of as philosophy.

[1 : 0 9] It can mean philosophies. It can mean religions. It can mean various worldviews. So, it's a very general umbrella term. And specifically, Paul is referring to philosophies, worldviews, or religions that are, as he says, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world.

In other words, he's saying, beware man-made philosophies. Beware ideas, worldviews, religions that have been generated entirely by human beings that rely on ideas and concepts belonging to the fallen world.

He says, anything that has originated in the fallen world is going to be subject to the limitations of a fallen world. Beware being taken captive by such ideas.

Now, in Colossae, this referred to certain teachers who were promising the secrets of higher, truer spirituality. They were promising to unlock the mysteries of true spirituality for their followers.

And they were gaining a great following. But there's a more general warning here for all Christians that I think that we need to hear. In fact, I think for all people that we need to hear. In every generation, new ideas and new philosophies are going to come along, and they're going to capture people's hearts.

[2 : 3 3] Because they're going to make great promises about how to understand and solve life's biggest problems. A great teacher, a great thinker, a great thought leader, a great philosopher is going to start a movement.

And it's going to say, up until now, we never understood these issues, but now we truly understand them, and now we can truly solve them. And that's something that you see happening in every generation. And the danger always is that Christians will be taken in by this.

Is that Christians will be willing to exchange the truth of the gospel for these newer, seemingly better ideas about ourselves, God, and the world. The danger is that Christians will look at their faith and say, this is old, this is tired, this is antiquated, it no longer applies, it's no longer relevant to society as it is now.

We need these newer ideas, they're going to be better for us. So that's the danger. And Paul says, if you do that, you're going to lose your freedom. You're going to lose the freedom that you have in Christ.

You're going to lose everything if you make that mistake. So we need to ask, as people who are sort of trying to understand this from thousands of years from when it was written, we need to ask, what's the big deal?

[3 : 42] What's the difference between the gospel and other religions, philosophies, and worldviews? Al Walters wrote a book called Creation Regained.

And if you know me, you know I refer back to this book again and again. It's a book that I would just recommend you read in its entirety. But he says in that book that apart from Christianity, every other religion and philosophy out there singles out some aspect of God's creation as the source of evil. And idolizes some other part of creation as the solution to evil. So he says apart from Christianity, every other religion and philosophy points to something in the created world as the source of evil and points to something else in the created world as the solution to evil.

And he gives a few examples. He says, you know, Plato and the Greeks said that the source of evil is the body and its passions, that we need to overcome that, right? Rousseau said that the source of evil is human culture as opposed to pure nature.

Freud said that the source of evil was authority figures in family and society. Marx said that it was economic forces and oppressive power structures.

[4 : 58] And Walters goes on to say, as far as I can tell, the Bible is unique in its rejection of all attempts to either demonize some part of creation as the root of our problems or to idolize some part of creation as the solution.

And you say, well, so what? This just sounds like semantic differences. What does that actually mean for me? Well, this is a huge deal for two main reasons. Number one, if you believe that some aspect of the created world is the source of evil, then you're going to begin to believe that there are certain things in the world that are inherently evil.

You're going to begin to divide the world in your mind. You're going to begin to see a line in the world between good and evil. You're going to begin to think of things in terms of good versus evil. You're going to begin to divide people into the categories of good and evil. You're going to be able to justify seeing certain people groups or ethnicities or nationalities or political parties as being inherently evil.

And others as being inherently good. You can begin to see why this might be relevant for us. So that's the first consequence of thinking this way. The second implication of this, if you believe that the solution to evil can be found in this world, if you think that there is something that we have access to here in this world that can overcome evil, then you will inevitably turn certain created things into idols.

[6 : 34] You're going to say, this thing is my greatest hope. This thing is what I need most. It's the thing that can overcome evil, that can solve all my problems, that will make everything better. I need this thing.

My life is not worth living without this thing. We're going to turn things into idols. And by the way, this is what the people in Colossae were doing. They were attaching idolatrous significance to certain diets, rituals, festivals, an ascetic lifestyle, vivid visions, angel worship.

These were things that they looked at and said, this is the key. This will unlock the deeper mysteries of true spirituality. They were idolizing certain things. Right? If you think this way, you're going to begin to believe that human beings are capable of overcoming evil on our own.

You're going to begin to think that all we need is our own morality, our intelligence, our technology. We need the right leaders. We need the right administration. We need the right policies.

We need more awareness. And then we can overcome evil and solve all the biggest problems of the world. You're going to put all of your trust in human effort to overcome evil.

[7 : 43] We can save ourselves. We can renew this world. And this isn't just something, by the way, that you find in religion. You know, some people hear this and they say, well, you know, that's why I'm not religious.

Well, this isn't something that you just find in religion. This kind of thinking is everywhere. It's the default setting for human beings. That's why you find this way of thinking in virtually every worldview, religion, and philosophy out there.

Because this is naturally how human beings think. Right? This kind of thinking of this is evil and this is good and we can overcome evil and it's all here in the world. This is the kind of thinking that divides people.

This is the kind of thinking that reinforces tribalism. It reinforces and undergirds racism or nationalism or jingoism. Many of the dynamics that are currently dividing our society today.

The social psychologist Jonathan Haidt wrote a book called *The Coddling of the American Mind*. And in the book he identifies three great untruths that have permeated the academy and politics and society at large.

[8 : 46] And one of the great untruths that he says now sort of has come to dominate our thinking is the idea that life is a great battle between good and evil. It's this exact same dynamic playing out.

He says that this way of thinking has come to dominate our society. I mean just to give one example of that I probably don't have to convince you of this. But this is a driving force in our politics. If you can make people afraid and then you can give them someone to blame you'll get elected.

If you can convince people that some other group of people is the enemy. That they're dangerous. That they're the problem. And then you can convince them that you're the savior.

You can get votes. It's a simple formula. Right? And this is the thing that all world views and philosophies and religions apart from the gospel have in common. They all point to something or someone in creation as the source of evil.

And they point to something or someone else. Sometimes themselves. As the solution to evil. And Paul is saying you've got to be careful. Ideas like this are seductive.

[10 : 05] They're persuasive. In the moment when you're suffering. When the problems are overwhelming. When you're filled with fear and anxiety. In that moment this kind of thinking is very appealing. Because everybody wants to know who do I blame?

Whose fault is it? Where's the evil? Paul is saying it's seductive but don't be taken captive by it. Because this is going to start to twist how you see yourself.

It's going to twist how you see other people. It's going to twist especially how you see people with whom you disagree. It's going to lead you either to demonize something or someone.

Or idolize something or someone. It's going to distort the way that you imagine the world to be. And that can do a lot of damage.

So then we ask well what's the alternative? What's the alternative if every worldview, philosophy, and religion out there sort of has within it this kind of thinking? What's the alternative?

[11 : 03] And this is why the gospel is such good news for the world. And why Paul's objective here is to bring us back to the truth of the gospel. And by the way this is why I believe our society is in desperate need not only of the message of the gospel.

But of people who actually believe it and live it out. Our society is in desperate need of such people. Here's why the gospel is a unique alternative.

Unlike all other worldviews the gospel says that God created the world entirely good. Entirely perfect. So nothing that you look at in creation was created evil.

Everything in creation, everyone in creation was intended to be good and perfect. God looked at this world and he delighted in its beauty and its perfection.

So evil, the gospel says, was not part of this world that God made. Evil entered in. Evil twisted God's good creation. Evil led human beings to rebel against God.

[12 : 08] The evil one, Satan, the deceiver, the tempter, right? We read about the serpent in the Genesis account, but this is much more than that. This is evil entering in and twisting creation, leading to rebellion.

And because of this, Paul says down in verse 13 of this passage, that we are spiritually dead. So unlike other religions, philosophies, worldviews that say you can overcome evil if you just do this thing or follow this path or accept these truths, then you can overcome evil.

The Bible is very unambiguous. You're spiritually dead. You've got no hope of doing it on your own. But the biggest difference between the gospel and other worldviews is that the gospel does not offer simply a different philosophy.

The gospel says, oh, your ideas are outdated. You need to just think this way. That's not what the gospel says. It doesn't offer a new philosophy or a new set of propositions for us to accept. The gospel offers us a person.

It says that the answer to evil in our world is the person of Jesus Christ. And if we understand who Jesus really is, we understand that Jesus is God entering in.

[13 : 19] Just as evil entered into the world, now God enters into His world in the flesh, in humanity, as Jesus Christ, in order to die on the cross, to overcome evil and death, and to set human beings free.

This is something that Paul has already laid out in this letter. And so the gospel has the power to begin to transform how we see ourselves and how we see the world around us and how we see God who made us.

It begins to change all of that. We begin to break down our categories. We cease thinking in terms of good versus evil in the world. We recognize that good that God has overcome.

There is no battle. There is no epic struggle. We begin to realize that nothing in creation is inherently evil. God loves everything and everyone He's made.

We begin to realize that everything, however, has been corrupted by evil. So in that great quote from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart.

[14 : 32] This is a distinct Christian way of thinking. It's one of the reasons we use this quote so often here is because it represents a distinctly Christian way of seeing the world.

But this is why Christians recognize the dignity and worth of every single human being. Everybody out there says, oh, human dignity, yes, human rights, we all believe in that.

But Christians have a reason for believing it. We have a foundation for believing it. And it's because of what we believe about God and creation and the inherent goodness and worth of every human being that God made.

This is why Christians should never see any people group or race or ethnicity or nationality or political group as being inherently inferior or inherently superior.

This is why Christians should never think of political leaders or systems in terms of good or evil.

This is why you can have faithful Christians who are Republicans or Democrats or something else.

[15 : 34] The world will be such one day where there may be no more United States. There may be no more Republican Party or Democratic Party or Independent Party.

There may be a new nation with new political parties. Christians could be fully involved in those parties, fully involved in those approaches and policies.

They could be fully involved in anything. And gospel-centered Christians should be able to enter into politics. We should be able to interact with all the various philosophies and ideologies and worldviews, take what we can from them without being taken captive by them.

Right? So the thing that Paul is calling us here is not to reject philosophy. It's not to reject politics. It's not to reject all of this. It's an inoculation.

You should be able to enter in, get involved, take what you can, interact, but not be taken captive. You should be immune to that because you're rooted in the greater truth of the gospel. And this is only true, we're only able to do this if we live with all of our lives in line with the gospel.

[16 : 45] And this, connected back to our series, is why discipleship matters so much. So to go back to verse 6 now, Paul's exhortation, Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.

What a beautiful image of discipleship. Rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. So discipleship means staying on the path, vigilantly guarding against anything that might take us captive by staying true to all that we have been given in Christ.

And you say, well, how can I ensure that I'm not taken captive by philosophy, empty deceit? Right? Because it happens subtly. Churches over time just sort of slowly go off the rails.

They slowly begin to look more and more and more like a certain political ideology than they do the gospel. Right? And it happens slowly. It happens quietly. It happens subtly. People sometimes don't even notice it until far past when it actually happened.

And you say, well, how can we ensure that this isn't the case in our church, in me? And this is where Paul gives the Colossians three guiding principles, or you might think of them as sort of three diagnostic questions, each referring to a different aspect of Christian discipleship that safeguard our freedom.

[18 : 06] So if we could restructure this, what he's really saying is this. As you have received, so live. As you were rooted, be built up.

As you were taught, be established in truth. So with the last few minutes that we have, we're just going to break each of those down. Number one, what does discipleship look like?

How do I make sure I'm not taken captive by these empty and divisive ways of thinking? As you received Christ, so walk in Him. Am I walking in line with Christ as I received Him?

And you say, well, how did you receive Christ? I received grace by faith. It was through my faith and through His grace.

It was by grace through faith that I received Him. That's what I received. And if you stay in line with that, then you know that there's nothing that you can do to make God love you any more or any less than He does at this moment.

[19 : 16] This reminds us, if I ever begin to believe that I can somehow impress God with my goodness or my devotion, that God is somehow sort of extra impressed with how much I care about this issue.

If I ever begin to think that way, I'm going off the path. If I ever begin to think that God is disappointed or fed up with me because I fail, I'm going off the path. If I ever begin to see myself as spiritually superior to other people, or if I begin to see other people as spiritually superior to me, oh, they're such a better Christian than I am.

If I begin to see other people as spiritually inferior to me, in all of these ways, I'm going off the path. How did I receive this? Grace by faith, right? It wasn't anything that I earned or deserved or could ever repay.

God gave it to me as He gave it to you as He gave it to them. As you received, so walk in Christ. Then He says, as you were rooted, be built up.

Another way to ask this would be to say, am I growing in my faith the same way I came to faith? Am I growing in my faith the same? Is the means of my growth the same as the means of my conversion?

[20 : 30] And you say, well, what do we do when we come to faith? We repent. That's what you do, right? Repent and believe. You repent and then you come to faith. One of the main ways that we grow as disciples is through repeated, ongoing, daily repentance.

And what Christians learn over time is that the more we repent, the more clearly we see our sin. And the more clearly we see our sin, the bigger God's grace gets in our lives.

We say, I didn't realize your grace was that big. I thought I only needed this amount of grace, and now I realize I need a whole lot more. And I realize that your grace is big enough. And, you know, this is very important for disciples.

I think that many of us assume that if we have to repent for the same thing over and over and over, that God sort of reaches a limit with us. You know, it's like I'm repenting for the 15th time this week for this same sin, that God kind of reaches a point where he's like, listen, I've let you off the hook, you know, 14 times, and I'm going to let you off one more time, but if you screw up again, we're done.

And I think that we assume that that's the way God operates. But the more we repent, the more we learn the truth. God's forgiveness is not rooted in the quality of your repentance or in your ability to sustain right behavior over a long enough period of time.

[22 : 02] God's forgiveness is rooted in the power of Christ's blood to cover all your sin. His forgiveness is not rooted in the quality of your repentance or in your ability to sustain right behavior over a long enough period of time.

His forgiveness is rooted in the power of Christ's blood to cover all of your sin. So come and repent again and again and again.

As you were rooted, so grow through daily repentance a hundred times, a thousand times, ten thousand times.

Every time you repent, God's grace will get bigger in your eyes. Number three, finally, Paul says, as you were taught, be established in truth.

As you were taught, be established in truth. This is the best way to translate this. It says faith in many translations, but what he's really talking about here is the teachings of the apostles.

[23 : 10] Do my beliefs, in other words, line up with the teachings of the apostles? This is another way to safeguard ourselves against ideological creep, against being slowly seduced and taken captive.

We repeatedly come back to this question, am I still believing what I received from the apostles? And the way that Christians talk about this is the word orthodoxy. Are my beliefs still orthodox? This is why we have orthodoxy. It helps us answer the question, am I in line with the teachings of the apostles? As I was taught, am I still established in that truth?

And Paul's warning here is very real. Any departure from the faith, as it was taught to us by the apostles, will unavoidably lead into captivity. So when you have the church in various generations saying, this new idea has come along, this new way of thinking, this new way of seeing things, this new way of understanding the human condition, we're going to let go of some of these teachings to begin to focus and embrace these teachings, right?

This is exactly the kind of thing Paul's talking about. You're being taken captive. Right? We're going to talk about this more in the coming weeks, but Christian maturity is not possible without orthodoxy.

[24 : 21] And Paul says if you go down that way of thinking, in one way or another, you're going to end up either demonizing or idolizing something in the created world. Don't do that. Don't sacrifice your freedom. So to bring all of this together, do you want a safeguard against empty and divisive ways of thinking?

Do you want a way of living that keeps you on the path? Cultivate a daily reliance on God's grace. Repent as often as you can.

And stay true to the teachings of the apostles. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for this call in our lives.

And we thank you that you don't give us this call and then leave us to it. That, Lord, as we said last week, you are at work in us now. And so I pray that even as we hear these words, you would be stirring us.

You would be speaking to us. You would be whispering your love and your grace to us where we need to hear it. You would be convicting and challenging us. That there are those of us who have grown far too comfortable with accommodation.

[25 : 31] And, Lord, we need to be stirred up. We need to be challenged. We need to be made uncomfortable. And there are others of us who are absolutely in distress. And we need your comfort. Only you know what we need.

And I pray that you would do that according to your power. In the name of your son, Jesus, for your glory. Amen.