

Alive in Christ: Virtue Signaling and the Victory of God

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon to all of you. As I said at the beginning of the service, really glad to be here together. We had a fantastic members meeting this morning, got a lot accomplished, and set our sights for the year ahead.

So very excited to report that. Now as we're gathered here this evening, we're going to spend some time looking at God's Word together as we do every week. Since Easter, we have been in a series looking at Paul's letter to the Colossians, which is in the New Testament.

It's a letter that Paul wrote to a church not unlike ours, to a church of people that he's never met personally. One of his disciples, a man named Epaphras, planted the church, but Paul is writing this letter.

And the theme of the letter, there's a number of themes, but the one that we're really tracing is this theme of life after the resurrection. In light of the resurrection of Jesus, how do we then live?

And this is a premise that we've been working off for the past few weeks. The idea being, if the resurrection of Jesus didn't actually happen, in other words, if it's just a nice idea that we like to talk about or use as a metaphor, really there's no value in the Christian faith.

[1 : 09] And I would strongly encourage you as your pastor to abandon the Christian faith. There's emptiness. There's nothing but tradition and pomp and circumstance. If, however, the resurrection did happen, which I believe it actually happened, and many of you believe that it actually happened as well, and by that we mean that Jesus actually rose from death bodily, then that actually changes everything.

And so that's the point of our series, is to ask, what does it change? And so today we're going to talk about our concept of human goodness. What does it mean to be a good person, and how does the resurrection impact our understanding of that?

That's what Paul's starting to get into in Colossians chapter 2 as we come to verse 16. A lot of us think about this question because D.C. is full of people who want to be good people.

You know, more and more every year I meet people who move to the city because they want to make a difference. Because they want to know that their life mattered. They want to leave the world better than they found it. So we're constantly asking, what does it mean to be a good person?

And what we see here, Paul kind of gives us two platforms or foundations for living a good life. The first foundation is the foundation of our own goodness and our own virtue.

[2 : 23] It's finding ways to be and to announce to the world our own virtue. The other foundation for a good life is found entirely outside of us. It's found in the accomplishments of Jesus Christ, the victory of Jesus Christ on the cross.

And so these alternatives we might think of as virtue signaling or the victory of God. And so that's what we're going to be talking about. Virtue signaling and the victory of God in Christ.

Two platforms for a good life. The passage is Colossians 2, 16 to 23. Let's pray for God to help us as we dive into this word.

Our Heavenly Father, we do recognize on this of all days, Trinity Sunday, that you've made the staggering promise. That you, Father, long ago promised to be a God who dwelt in the midst of your people.

We never could have imagined that that would lead to the fulfilling of that promise in the form of the Son. Who came and became one of us and dwelt in our midst.

[3 : 29] And gave us, Lord, what ultimately became your written word. And then now, even as we are gathered, even though your Son ascended into the heavenly realm, we know that through the

Holy Spirit, as we open this text, you can actually use this to reveal to us your living word.

Jesus Christ, that we can actually encounter Him as we are gathered here together today. And so, O God who is three in one, we pray that you would fulfill that promise in us today through your word. By the power of your Spirit. In your Son's holy name. Amen. So, virtue signaling. This is happening in the church in Colossal. What's going on?

Let me read the opening verse of this passage. Verse 16. Therefore, Paul says, so you know he's right in the middle of an argument, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival, or a new moon, or a Sabbath.

What's going on? Well, people are passing judgment. Why? Well, Paul's writing, as I said, to a young, vibrant church, full of people who are genuine converts.

[4 : 34] They believe in the grace of Jesus Christ. They've been baptized. They want to follow Jesus faithfully. Like many of you here. However, there are people in this community, false teachers and the like, who have begun encouraging a whole array of extra spiritual practices.

Right? So that's what Paul is talking about with eating and drinking. There are certain things that you could eat. Certain things that you weren't supposed to eat. Certain times when you weren't supposed to eat anything. And then there were all of these festivals being tacked on.

Some of these things they're taking from the Old Covenant, the Old Testament way. The pre-Jesus Jewish way of spirituality. And they're importing these into Christianity and saying we need to keep doing them.

But other practices were being cherry-picked from paganism. Right? Things that looked good, that looked spiritual, that looked like beneficial to life.

And so they would just bring these in. And they said all of these things are extra practices. And so you ask, well, what's the problem with that? Well, here's the real issue.

[5 : 40] Paul is not necessarily concerned with all of the practices themselves. Surely he would not be excited about the pagan practices and he would oppose those. But some of these are coming in from the Jewish tradition.

And Christianity is fundamentally rooted in Judaism. And so some of these practices have continuing benefits. Practices like a weekly Sabbath. Practices like regular fasting.

Right? Many of us do those things as well. So Paul is not condemning the practices themselves necessarily. His question is one of motive. Why are you doing these things?

Why are you encouraging others to do them? Is it to draw closer to Christ? To hold fast to Christ? Or is it really about your desire to assert or advertise your spiritual superiority?

And as we look at the verses, we see it's really a case of the latter. Verses 18 and 19. He says, So in other words, he's saying these people who are saying, So in other words, he's saying, You must fast.

[7 : 06] You must eat or drink these things. You must eat or drink these things. You must do this festival. These people, their real motive is to puff themselves up. And how are they doing that? By passing judgment on other people.

They're puffing themselves up, asserting their own spiritual superiority at the expense of other people. Shame and judgment. And Jesus actually warns against this same thing in our gospel reading.

Matthew chapter 6. Where he says, Listen, when you give to the needy, don't blow a trumpet. Gather a huge crowd. And then give your gift.

He says, That's not the point. It's okay if nobody knows. This is between you and God. He says, When you go and pray, don't stand on a street corner and wax eloquent for hours, making sure everybody hears how pious you are.

That's not the point. This is between you and God. Do it in secret. He's saying, Don't advertise your spiritual excellence. That directly undermines the heart of the gospel.

[8 : 09] So essentially what we're seeing here in Paul's warning and in Jesus, and Paul addresses this also in Romans 14, our other lesson, is we're seeing people who are engaging in what we might call the first century equivalent of virtue signaling.

Now if you've ever heard this phrase, It's a term that's been popularized in recent years. Some might say virtue signaling has been very much overused. Honestly, when a term like that starts showing up in Christian sermons, it's a good sign that it's been overused.

And so that's probably the case. We're probably at peak virtue signal right now in our culture. But I'll give you a technical definition. So broadly speaking, virtue signaling can really refer to anything. Anything that we say, anything that we do, anything that we imply. And the thing that makes it virtue signaling is when the primary motive is advertising our own moral excellence, our own rightness, our own goodness for other people to see, so that we will gain social standing.

So again, I can identify with this group and be affirmed by them because of what I say, do, or imply. And the key is it usually involves shaming other people.

[9 : 39] So you take a position or you assert an opinion or a stance, and you by default shame a group that might not line up with that. So let me give you a benign example. Say you say, I hate SUVs.

What's happening there? Well, it could be one of a couple of things. Either you really do hate SUVs. Maybe you had a bad childhood experience and you just have this antipathy toward four-wheel drive vehicles, and that's your thing, and that's totally fine.

But it could also be a form of virtue signaling because what are you saying? By saying, I hate SUVs, first of all, anybody out there who owns an SUV or likes SUVs, you're automatically passing judgment on them, right?

You're also asserting that you value caring for the environment. I hate SUVs because of their impact on the environment. Now, is there anything wrong with caring for the environment?

No, quite the opposite. Christians should be very much on the front lines of environmental stewardship. But notice, you're not necessarily having to do anything. To help the environment.

[10 : 42] All you're doing is saying something that alerts all of the other environmentally conscious people out there that you care about the environment because you hate SUVs. And what you might be trying to really do is to gain the social points that come with that.

And this is what we call virtue signaling. Right? And the thing is, the point I want to make now is that virtue signaling is everywhere. In every society, every, we see it in the first century, we see it in the 21st century.

It's everywhere. And it's not limited by liberal or conservative or religious or irreligious. All of us engage in this behavior. So I want to give you a few examples of this. There are Christian ways of virtue signaling.

If you've been in the church long enough, you've seen it. You've been around it. People who use or imply or talk in super spiritual ways. Like this kind of thing happens. There are Christian ways of signaling our virtue and putting our piety on display.

But that's just a small subset or one example of how this happens. We can take just about anything and turn it into a virtue signal. Take food.

[11 : 53] Let's just think about our relationship with food for just a second. If you look at my Instagram feed and you look at some of the pictures that show up, they are nearly pornographic.

But they're pictures of souffles and filet mignon and grilled vegetables for the love of God. Grilled vegetables, but shot in such a way that I feel ashamed looking at them.

Why? Because we are, as a culture, worshippers of food. Our society, we worship food. And not surprisingly, we've become highly legalistic about our food.

We are enormously legalistic. So I thought about doing the Whole30 diet last year. I didn't actually do it. But I thought about doing it.

And you know what I realized? Is that all I have to do is tell people I'm thinking about doing it. I don't actually have to do it. But I just say, you know, I'm thinking about doing the Whole30. And people say, whoa.

[12 : 53] You know, you're hardcore. This guy's disciplined. This guy's really health conscious. I'm not disciplined. That's why I need to do the Whole30. But when I say that, I'm signaling to you that I'm the kind of person who thinks about that.

And maybe I get some points from that. And I realize I don't actually have to do it. I just have to think about it. So I'm still thinking about it. I'm still thinking about it. But all the labels. Think about all of the labels.

All natural. Non-GMO. Organic. Free range. Gluten free. All of these things. And listen. Again, let me make the point. These things do matter. But it also feels good to say these things.

So is Paul condemning the things themselves? No. He's saying, what is your motive? Why are you bringing it up at that party? Why are you talking about it? What are you trying to get out of this

experience?

These things signal that you're a conscious eater. And that's a very high value in our culture right now. Right? You're thoughtful about what goes into your body. Now maybe you have all of these labels and apply them to yourself.

[13:55] Right? And maybe nobody will ever invite you to a dinner party again. But guess what? You get all of the social points for being a thoughtful eater. Right? Think about the parenting world.

Listen. The parenting world. It's crazy land out there. The legalism is enormous. Right? Natural home birth. Breastfeeding for at least a year.

Again, these things are probably good for kids. I think that they are. But they can easily become virtue signals. And there are competing philosophies.

Right? You have your helicopter parents over here. And you have your attachment parents over here. And they each have their own full set of virtue signals. And ways of subtly shaming one another.

For being bad parents. And do you know how much shame and stress parents feel? Because we have no idea. We're just trying to keep our kids alive.

[14:51] Most of us are just trying to keep our kids alive. And get five or six hours of sleep a night. That's like the best we can do. And then you got all these things out there making us feel bad.

But it happens. Our news feeds are our perfect fodder for virtue signaling. Whatever the outrage du jour happens to be. There are always new causes and new issues that become fodder for virtue signaling.

And the thing is, I don't know about you, but I feel the constant need to declare. You know, something happens that's major, some scandal. And we feel the pressure to declare through social media and for everybody to see.

I'm for this. I'm against this. Right? I support this. I stand against this. There's very little time for biblical thoughtful reflection.

Because by the time we fire off a post or share an article, the next issue is happening and demands a response. And we look out there and we feel like we have to say, this is what I think.

[16:01] I've had 15 minutes to think about it. And here's my holistic, well-rounded, thoughtful opinion on this, that, or the other outrage du jour.

And we know that the only thing worse than saying something, maybe, is not saying anything. That that may be the worst thing of all. You are part of the group who is keeping silent on this issue. And we realize it's a shame or be shamed culture.

Shame or be shamed. So instead of thoughtful cultural engagement, which is what Christians are called to, we often default into thoughtless clicktivism.

Right? Just clicking away. For, against, for, against, for, against. Dodging that shame bullet as best we can. Right? I have to say a word about companies.

Because these days, if you can tie your brand or your product to virtue, you can sell a bunch of whatever you're selling. So we've got to talk about Whole Foods.

[16:59] Now, again, I'm not knocking Whole Foods. I like Whole Foods. I like shopping at Whole Foods when I can afford it. Whole Foods is a great place. But listen, we've got to be honest about what's happening in that place. We've just got to be honest about it.

Right? There's a sign in the window at Whole Foods that shows a mother with a little girl on her shoulders. Super cute. Super sweet. Here's what it says. Values matter.

Right? Okay. So this is not a church. Right? This is a grocery store. Right? Now, some people don't are, do you know that? Right? It's not a church. It's a grocery store.

But it goes on to say we are part of a growing consciousness that is bigger than food. One that champions what's good. And the greater good too. So you go into Whole Foods and you can buy your \$6 asparagus water.

But you're not just getting asparagus water. You're getting the ability to then advertise to the world that you are part of the greater good. How easy is that? You didn't have to do anything.

[18:01] Right? You get water with a stalk of asparagus in it. And you get to feel better about yourself. Who wouldn't want that for \$6? Right?

So think about Tom's shoes. I own a pair of Tom's shoes. My son Riley has like a little pair of Tom's shoes. Little slippers. Virtue signals for your feet.

That's essentially what they are. Not knocking Tom's shoes. Virtue signals for your feet. By the way, you can also virtue signal by being against all of these things.

So that's what I'm doing right now. Now, I'm virtue signaling to you by mocking Whole Foods and Tom's shoes. And that's a whole other side of it. Is that you can be for or you can be against. And you can virtue signal that you don't get into all that.

Right? You're more enlightened. You're a better thinker. And you've got to understand there are layers and layers and layers of this. It's way too complicated to keep track. And at the end of the day, whatever virtues we choose to signal, chances are we are putting ourselves in danger of being shamed by other virtue signalers.

[19 : 04] You can't avoid it, in other words. It's shame or be shamed. Take yoga. Those of you who do yoga, you have it hard right now. Why? Well, because there's whole sets of virtues around doing yoga.

Right? If you wear your mat and the yoga pants and all that, and you carry that around, people look at you and they say, they are both spiritual and health conscious. That's amazing. That's like a two for one right there. Right?

Just for carrying your mat in your backpack, you get two sets of points. Right? So that's the good news about it. Here's the bad news. Did you know that a growing number of people are saying that Western white people who do yoga are practicing cultural appropriation?

Now, they're signaling race consciousness there. So you have a choice to make. Okay? Either you gain the spiritual health conscious points, but you're culturally appropriating, or you give up yoga and give up those points, and you care more about race and respecting cultures.

But you really can't have it all. You've got to make the choice. And this is happening again and again and again and again because there's constantly virtue and shame in this weird economy that we live in now, being passed from one group to another, and it's unavoidable.

[20 : 15] Last thing I'll say about this before we move on, I'm just as prone to this as anyone. Every single time I'm preaching and I say, well, I saw this article in the New York Times, or I was reading The Economist last week.

Right? I could just have found the perfect article that perfectly illustrates this biblical point, or I could be virtue signaling. In other words, I could be saying, I'm the kind of person who reads this.

I'm the kind of person who thinks about this. In fact, even using the term virtue signaling is virtue signaling. I'm the kind of person who knows terms like that and thinks about this kind of stuff.

And in some circles, that's a virtue. Right? So it is happening all of the time. So the \$64,000 question for us to consider is this. Why?

Why are we doing this? Why this virtue and shame economy? Why is it so pervasive? And I think it shows us something about human nature.

[21 : 20] Here's something about human nature that we need to realize. We can completely get rid of religion. But we can never stop being religious. We can completely scrap the idea of sin and righteousness.

How antiquated. How legalistic. How black and white. How moralistic. How judgmental. Let's get rid of all of that. Sin and righteousness. Out the door. But we cannot quench that desire in us.

To know that we are righteous. Now you may not think of it as that. But don't you want to know deep down that at the end of the day, you're good enough?

That you meet the standard? That there's somebody out there who looks at you and says, you did it. You're enough. You live a good life.

You're a good person. There's this need in us to measure ourselves. And so we're hungry for standards. We're hungry for approval and affirmation.

[22 : 26] We're hungry for somebody to tell us, it's okay. You pass muster. You've done it. You've exceeded the standards. You're in. Another way of saying this is that we are trying to be our own savior.

We're trying to be our own source of righteousness. And this is the root of what Paul calls in verse 23, all self-made religion.

That's what self-made religion is. It's creating a system that I can then live into and live up to that will then tell me at the end of the day, you've done it.

You're righteous. You've got it. So whether it's Hinduism or Whole Foods, whether it's political ideologies or parenting philosophies, we crave those measures.

But Paul says in verse 23, these things may have the appearance of wisdom. Right? You think of the people who, you know, these things look like wisdom.

[23 : 27] They look like spirituality. They look like the right way to live. They look like things that matter. And yet Paul says at the end of the day, all self-made religion is empty.

He says it's of no real value when it comes to real transformation. They're vain. And so Paul contrasts all of the virtue signaling that we do, all of the building up of standards, living up to the standards, and then heaping on the self-generated righteousness that comes from those standards. He says all of that. He contrasts that with the victory of God in Jesus Christ. Here's the alternative. Here's the other source of what you're looking for.

The victory of God in Christ. So look at what Paul says about all of these spiritual practices that were happening in Colossians, verse 17. This is, I think, the core of understanding this passage. He says all of these practices, all that self-made religion, all that stuff, these are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. You have shadow and you have actual substance.

[24 : 35] A few hundred years before Paul was writing or before Jesus came, Plato wrote the allegory of the cave. And you may be familiar with this.

A lot of us study it in school. Just to refresh you, the allegory of the cave is essentially about people who, for all their lives, have been chained in a dark underground cave.

And all their lives, because of the way things are set up, they're only able to see shadows that are projected on the walls. So they see these shadows and that's all they've seen all their lives.

And the tragedy is, at that point in their lives, these people could not possibly imagine that there are real things that are casting those shadows. In other words, all they see is the shadow.

They don't see the substance, the actual things that are casting the shadows. And that's the tragic point of the allegory, is that human beings, Plato is saying, human beings see shadow and we think we're seeing substance.

[25 : 36] We look at shadows and we think that we're seeing the real thing. We're just seeing shadows. And I think Paul had that in mind when he was writing this letter to a largely Gentile audience in Colossae.

I think this is what he was drawing from. You do all of these rituals and all of these practices and all of these fasts and all of these, observe all of these holy days and do all of these things.

And you think that that's spiritually substantial. It's not. These are all shadows. All you're getting is the shadow of righteousness. You're getting the shadow of salvation.

You're getting the shadow of grace. You're getting the shadow of forgiveness. You're getting the shadow of spiritual growth. You're getting the shadow of all of these things. But the real substance, he says, is Jesus Christ.

He's the one casting the shadow into the world. Why do we even think about righteousness? Why do we even want it? Why do we even think about forgiveness? Why do these things even matter to us? Why are they built into other religions?

[26 : 36] Jesus is casting a shadow into the world. He is the substance. So what's Paul saying? Another way of thinking it is this. All of our religious longing, whether I am virtue signaling with my healthy practices and my diet and my wardrobe, or whether I'm engaging in ancient pagan moon rituals, whatever it is, all of this, in it we are only really truly deeply longing for Jesus Christ.

Even if we don't know his name, that's what we're longing for. Because here's the point. Either we try to save ourselves, or we come to Jesus and accept the salvation that he offers.

But I think if we're honest, apart from Jesus, we cannot stop trying to save ourselves. That's why we live in this bizarre shame virtue economy.

We're trying to save ourselves. We're doing it through fasting and new moon festivals, meditation, law keeping, advocacy, attachment parenting, or championing non-GMO, locally sourced organic free-range baby food, whatever your thing is.

We're trying to save ourselves. Paul says, give that up. Come to Jesus Christ to find the salvation that you need, but that you cannot be. Because coming to Jesus means admitting that all of this, all of the virtue signaling, all of the references, all the stuff that might impress you, that it's all bankrupt.

[28 : 09] That it's just shadows. That if you think that I'm a virtuous person, you're seeing shadows. There's no truth to it. The actual reality is that I'm completely bankrupt.

The reason that I have to fake it is because I have no real virtue to put on display. That's why I have to make it about where I buy my groceries. Because there's nothing of any substance to show you. And when you come to Jesus and you begin to actually admit that to him, what you begin to realize is that the whole point of Christianity is becoming joined to Jesus. And what happens when you become joined with him is that all of that sin, all of that failure and shortcoming, all of that gets put onto him.

And then it all gets put to death on the cross, past, present, and future. And in return, all of his true virtue becomes ours. Like an inheritance.

It becomes ours. Right? That's why Paul says in verse 20, In other words, he's saying, Why, if all of your sin has been taken away and you've been given this unimaginable virtue of Jesus Christ, that's been poured into your life, Why in the world are you still scrabbling for scraps?

[29 : 28] Why are you submitting yourself to something that no longer applies to you? That's like somebody winning a billion dollars and then digging through their sofa for loose change.

He says, That's lunacy. Why? Why are you doing it? Don't you realize what you have? So as we think about this, We're led to ask the so what question.

So what? What does real spiritual growth then mean? How does real spiritual growth happen? The answer in verse 19, by holding fast to Christ. Not our own virtue, but his virtue.

So in this context, that means this, that every day we have a choice. Either we base our sense of worth and excellence and goodness on ourselves, on our choices, on our stances, on our shopping habits.

Or we base it on the virtue of Jesus Christ. We live lives either that signal our virtue, or we live lives that signal his virtue. Because it's not ultimately about where you shop or what your diet is.

[30 : 37] You can keep doing all of these things if you want. But here's the shift. When we eat, regardless of whether you went to Safeway or Giant or Whole Foods or wherever you got it, regardless of whether it is GMO or whatever, when we eat, focus less on how our food choices reflect our virtue, and focus more on how our food represents God's virtue of generosity.

That he's the kind of God who provided it for us, right? When we have kids, focus less on the crazy world of parenting fads, and more on trusting God with the well-being of our children.

Because you know what half of these fads really are? They're the illusion of control. Because you're terrified to realize that you have very little control over what happens to your kids.

So we can either signal our own meaningless, vapid virtue, or we can work on trusting God, because his virtue is that he's trustworthy. Right?

When we respond to cultural or political events, we should focus less on what responses will gain us the most social standing, and focus more on following Christ through his word, recognizing that sometimes that brings us into the path of being shamed.

[31 : 52] It did for him. And when we fear the shame or rejection of others, we need to hold fast to Jesus, who endured far worse, so that he could then say to us, for you all who are in me, he says this through Paul, there is no longer, therefore, any condemnation.

There is no longer any real judgment. Only the shadows of judgment that might affect you for a brief time before eternity. So the more we hold fast to Christ, the less, I believe, we will feel the need to signal our virtue.

Because you're building confidence in him, you need it less. So you keep doing what you're doing, but you don't have the same motives. It just doesn't matter. And I think, conversely, we don't fear shame as much.

Oh, you want to make fun of me because I buy my groceries? Or how I raise my kids? Okay. Make fun of me. My security rests in a thing that is unshakable.

And the more we have our security and our sense of worth and goodness rooted in the cross, you recognize what the cross is. The cross is actually the ultimate virtue signal.

[33 : 00] But unlike ours, which are empty and stupid and meaningless, the cross is actually a real signal. It's a signal to the entire world of the true, lasting, and eternal virtue of the kind of God who stopped at nothing and gave up everything so that we could belong to him and be free from shame and condemnation for all of eternity.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.