

The Right Way Forward - Colossians 2:18-23

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[0 : 00] Delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen. They are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.

They have lost connection with the head from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. Verse 20, since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces, of this world, why, as though you still belong to the world, do you submit to its rules?

Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. These are rules which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use. These rules are based on merely human commands and teachings.

Such regulations, indeed, have an appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body.

But they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. Let's pray. Father, as we come to your word, we come before you humbly, asking that you would open our eyes, that we would see, that you would open our hearts to receive the good news once again of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 24] That we would recognize how great you are and how far we have fallen. That we would see once again that you have bridged the gap in the person and work of Jesus.

Would you speak through me, Lord? Would you teach us? In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, like I said, last week we looked backwards at Leviticus 16, and we used that as our illustration of what an Old Testament type or shadow looked like.

And so this week, if you'll turn to Exodus 32, we're going to use the story in Exodus 32 as our illustration through this part of Colossians. And as you turn there, I'll remind you, the reason that oftentimes we'll use Old Testament stories as our illustrations is the way Scripture is designed is the drama of Scripture produces the doctrines of Scripture.

The drama of the Old Testament and the Gospel accounts and the Book of Acts, they produce the doctrines that we see of the Christian faith in the epistles. And we're in a letter in Colossians, which is very doctrinal.

And so we'll see that the drama from the Old Testament delivers these doctrines that we see in the New Testament. These doctrines lead us into a place of worship or doxology, and it's from a place of worship that we live a life of discipleship.

[2 : 47] And so we oftentimes want to look back at what happened in the Old Testament, because as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, that is there for our example. And Exodus 32 is an interesting story.

It's sometimes well known. It might be new to you today, and that's fine. But in Exodus 32, what's going on is Israel has come out of Egypt, and they're at the base of Mount Sinai. And God has covenanted with the nation of Israel that in the same way that He brought them out of Egypt, out of the slavery under Pharaoh, in the same way that He redeemed them, He will lead them forward into the Promised Land.

And before we get to Exodus 32, we see the elders and the leaders of the nation of Israel with Moses and Aaron and Joshua. We see them feast with the Lord and seal this covenant.

And now everybody's gone down the mountain except for Moses. Moses is at the top of the mountain meeting with God, as it were, as God delivers the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets.

And so Moses is at the top of the mountain. Joshua is a little bit further down. And then the whole nation of Israel is waiting at the bottom of the mountain. And in chapter 32 of Exodus, verse 1, we pick up where it says, when the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, come make us gods who will go before us.

[4 : 12] As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him. And then what follows is Aaron, he listens to their demands. And he has them bring their earrings, their gold, and they forge this gold into a golden calf.

And verses 2-8 show us that they make this golden calf, and Aaron presents this golden calf as their god. And they begin to worship an idol.

And they have a whole festival worshipping this golden calf. As if this golden calf can now lead them forward. So great, yes, God brought them out.

He redeemed them. He brought them out from slavery. But now this new thing that they made is going to lead them forward to the promised land. And God tells Moses about what's going down.

And in verse 15 we pick up in Exodus 32, 15, Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back.

[5 : 18] The tablets were the work of God. The writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, there's a sound of war in the camp.

And Moses replied, it is not the sound of victory. It is not the sound of defeat. It is the sound of singing that I hear. And when Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned.

And he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire. Then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

Very odd twist in the story there. As we read, it continues that what Moses does then is he draws a line in the sand, as it were, and 3,000 Israelites are put to death that day.

A very odd sort of story. A very serious story. And a story which conveys to us how important it is for us to recognize that in the same way that God redeems us, He has a way which He will sanctify us.

[6 : 34] And we're not to come up with that way on our own. So in the same way that God redeemed Israel, through His work, by His plan, according to His will, He had a way for them to move forward.

And it's the same for us as Christians, that our source of sanctification, this is our main idea, our source of sanctification, or that is, how we continue to grow in the faith, is the same source as our salvation.

Namely, Jesus Christ. So the source for moving forward as God's people is the same as the source which makes us God's people. And that's what we see in Exodus 32, and that's what Paul is going to begin to expound here in Colossians 2.

And what we're going to look at today is our problems. There's three of them. Our protection, and our path ahead. Our problems, our protection, and our path ahead. So first, our problems.

And again, there's three of them. First, we have the problem of often listening to the wrong people. Either others, or ourselves. And last week, we looked at the problem of listening to the wrong people when they try to point us backwards into Old Testament shadows, or theological legalism.

[7 : 48] And this week, we look at the problem of listening to others, or even ourselves, as we look forward, and we turn to man-made methods for sanctification. Aaron made this mistake.

He listened to Israel, instead of to Moses, who had told him what God had said. And like Aaron, we often find ourselves surrounded by other voices, telling us how it is that we should move forward in the faith.

In fact, most researchers say that today we're suffering from information overload. I found an article in an English news source this week that said, if you think you are suffering from information overload, then you may be right.

A new study shows everyone is bombarded by the equivalent of 174 newspapers worth of data per day. I don't know if you can imagine sitting down and reading 174 newspapers every single day.

That's a lot of information. But research shows that's how much information is coming at us just by living normal life on planet Earth right now. That's 34 gigabytes of information.

[8 : 59] It's enough to destroy your computer in one week, completely overloaded. And yet, that's what's coming at us every single day. As we try to stay in God's Word and we try to grow in Christ, we have all these voices shouting to us from the world, calling us to other ways, other methods for living life.

The result is, we're becoming a people who live in this information age that are less contemplative, less thoughtful, less intentional, and much more reactionary to just doing whatever those other things tell us to do.

And the reality is, I think if we take a moment to think about ourselves, we'll recognize we're going to listen to somebody. We're going to listen to somebody.

Either others, or I would argue even worse, we'll listen to ourselves, or we will listen to God and what He says. If we listen to others, we run the risk of being like the people here in Colossians 2:18.

That's why Paul strongly says, in verse 18, do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person goes into great detail about what they have seen, and they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.

[10 : 20] And so here's what's going on in Colossians. You have people who are Christians. They have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And when they start to look at, how can I become a better Christian, so to speak, how can I grow in my faith, they're just making stuff up, and then they're calling others to it, and they're placing the burden of man-made religion on those people.

And we have papyri, we have inscriptions that show us in that area, people are just coming up with stuff. They're saying what you need to do is you need to fast for a long time, and then not sleep for a long time, and then have this kind of spiritual experience.

And if you have the right spiritual experience, then you're more Christian than somebody else. And again, it's just man-made. And I can tell you, I did some extreme training in the U.S. Navy, and if you withhold food and sleep from someone for long enough, they will have experience.

You just hallucinate. Your brain malfunctions, and you just start to see things that aren't there, and experience things that aren't actually happening. And what's going on in Colossians, people are just making this up, that you need to be harsh on your body, withhold sleep, withhold food, and then have some sort of spiritual experience, and that will propel you forward in the faith.

So you're brought to faith by Christ, but now it's up to you to really become a good Christian. And Paul says, don't let people disqualify you by convincing you to listen to them.

[11 : 55] Don't let them prevent you from moving forward in the faith. I like how Eugene Peterson, he translates this in the message as, do not tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels, and that you seek out visions.

There are a lot of hot air, and that's all they are. Again, consider Exodus 32 again. They pressured Aaron to listen to them, to come up with a new way forward, a new God who would go before them, other than the God who had already saved them.

And Paul says in verse 22 of Colossians 2, he says, these rules are destined to perish. That's because they're based on merely human commands and teachings.

Somebody came up with them. And so we might think that instead of listening to others, maybe we'll come up with our own ideas. And the Bible says, well, that's even worse.

It's an even worse option. Because if we think about where did the others get their ideas, well, somebody came up with it themselves at some point. And when it comes to the things of God, we are so fallen that, to be just completely frank, we don't come up with good ideas on our own.

[13 : 24] John Calvin says, our hearts are idol factories. He says, the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols. The human mind, stuffed as it is with presumptuous rashness, dares to imagine a God suited to its own capacity.

And that's what the Israelites were doing at Sinai. They dreamt up what God would be in their minds. Calvin says, as our mind labors under dullness, it is sunk into the grossest ignorance.

And then it substitutes vanity and empty phantoms in the place of God. And then to these evils and others added, the God whom man has thus conceived inwardly, he attempts to embody outwardly.

The mind conceives the idol. The hand gives it birth. And so we think, I won't listen to others. I'll just come up with my own way forward. My own way to please God. And the Bible is just overly abundant that that won't work because all we will conceive are idols.

Only God gets to say how He's worshipped. In Jeremiah 17, Scripture says, the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.

[14 : 38] Who can understand it? The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Listening to ourselves is not the answer. I found this quote interesting because at first it sounds nice.

Follow your instincts, go inside. Follow your heart right from the start. It's not a bad sounding quote. Follow your instincts right from the start. Follow your heart right from the start.

It's a Buddhist proverb. See, every other religion out there, every other worldview says that you've got something inside of you that's really good and you need to look to that and that will propel you forward.

And the Bible says that's simply not true. Ecclesiastes 9.3 says, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil. There is madness in their hearts while they live.

Following your heart, listening to yourself won't do you any better than listening to others. And so we'll need a third option. We can't listen to others. We can't listen to ourselves.

[15 : 41] There has to be a third option. And before we come back to that third option, I want to show you two other problems that Paul points out here. He also points out the problem of the appealing appearance of lies.

If you think about it, lies don't usually look like big, ugly things. They usually look kind of appealing. In verse 23, Paul says, such regulations that are these man-made commands, they have an appearance of wisdom.

They look good. With their self-imposed worship, their false humility, their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

And we have to recognize the subtle veneer of truth that is often painted over Satan's lies. They have the appearance of wisdom. They seem humble. They seem like they can restrain in sensual indulgence.

It seems like this might help you be a better Christian. But they're useless in helping you move forward in the faith. Again, think about what the Israelites said to Aaron.

[16 : 45] There's actually truth in some of the things they said to him. When the people saw that Moses was long in coming down, they gathered around Aaron and said, make us gods who will go before us.

As for this fellow Moses, who brought us out of Egypt, we don't know what happened to him. Now, there's some truth in what they said. It had been 40 days since Moses had gone up the mountain. That's a long time.

If you think back to early June, that's the last time they had seen this guy Moses. They weren't sure what had happened to him. There had been thunder and lightning on the mountain.

And this guy Moses, who had led him out of the Promised Land, they weren't sure what had happened to him. And if we're honest, it's always nice to have a God go before us, especially as they're going into battle to conquer other nations.

Of course, it would be great to have God go before them. So there's this appealing appearance to these lies. And what makes a lie a good lie is it has just a bit of truth polished over the top of it, doesn't it?

[17 : 48] And the same was going on in Colossae. There's an appearance of wisdom. It seemed like good advice to have these spiritual experiences. There's a false humility. It seemed like the person leading it, yeah, they seem like a good person.

They're a humble guy or gal. It seems like it could restrain sensual indulgence in that if you follow these methods, well, you'll be a better person. Maybe God will even be more pleased with you.

And the same happens today in man-made religions that claim to make us better. They often have appearances of wisdom. They're often led by people who have a false humility.

And they promise a better path forward and that you can be a better person. So we have the problem of listening to the wrong people. We have the problem of the appealing appearance of lies.

And then the third problem that Paul points out is the seriousness of the situation. We see this in verse 19. That the people who have listened to others and not themselves have lost connection with the head from whom the whole body supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews grows as God causes it to grow.

[19 : 03] Now sometimes we just read right over that little illustration that they have lost connection with the head. I don't think we have any little children in here so we can just be honest.

Nothing good happens if a part of your body loses connection with your head. Beheading is not a way forward. It's a way to death.

And Paul's being over the top gruesome if we really think about it. If I were to take any part of my body, if I were to cut off my hand, sever my hand from my head and set it here and then come back next week and yell at my hand for not growing, you would say you're a fool.

You severed that body part from the rest of your body. It's been severed from any source of life and you're getting upset at it for not growing. And Paul's saying anybody that comes up with their own path forward, anybody that comes up with some new source of sanctification, they have severed themselves from the head.

So don't be shocked as they wither and shrivel and die. We cannot separate ourselves from Christ. It's a serious situation.

[20 : 16] Just like we saw in Exodus 32. It led to the death of 3,000 people. There is no separation from the head which goes well for any person.

It is a serious situation. And we have to recognize it's just as serious today as it was in Paul's day as it was in Israel's day. Will we listen to others or will we listen to ourselves?

Will we listen to the one true God? Will we recognize how serious the situation is? How attractive lives can look?

Or will we faithfully follow Christ as God grows us? And that's what Paul says there in Colossians 2.19 that being connected to the head God causes us to grow.

So we who have believed in the gospel that is we have confessed that we are sinners and we have professed faith in Christ that He lived the perfect life that we couldn't live that He died the death we should have died that He was raised on the third day that He ascended to heaven that He will return for His people.

[21 : 37] Those of us who have confessed our sins and professed those truths those of us who are Christians that have believed in the gospel we don't begin to grow ourselves in the faith.

God grows us in the faith in the ways that He has said we will grow. And now we begin to see our protection. So we see all these problems that we are faced with and Paul now lays out our protection there in verse 19 as well.

That is, is from the head that the whole body supported and held together grows as God causes it to grow. Now if we look back at Colossians 1.18 who is the head?

Paul says that is Christ who is the head of the body of the church. He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead. So in the same way that we said a few weeks ago that there is no new birth, there is no Christian salvation apart from Christ, there is also no growth or sanctification in Christianity without Christ.

And that is why Paul says in verse 20, since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why? As though you still belong to the world. Do you submit to its rules? He says Christianity is dying with Christ.

[22 : 52] It is being raised with Christ. And it is living in Christ. It is an all-encompassing life with Christ. That is why we say the gospel both brings you in and grows you up.

You never grow out of the gospel. It brings us in and grows us up. It creates an entire new way of life and literally affects everything about us.

I would argue that the gospel is not just the ABCs of coming to faith, but it is the A to Z, or I think you say Z, of being in the faith. It is the beginning and the middle and the end.

And so it is inaccurate to think that the gospel is just what saves non-Christians. And in Christians, we mature by just trying hard to live to some principles.

That is not what the gospel is. It is more accurate to say we are saved by believing the gospel and then we are transformed in every part of our hearts and our minds and our lives by believing the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on.

[24 : 02] We continue to look up at God and how great He is. We continue to recognize how far we have fallen. We see Christ bridging that gap, bringing us back to be God's people, putting us back in a relationship with God.

And we see that over and over and over again. And as we steep ourselves in the gospel, then we grow in the faith. We don't come up with our own methods. Christ is the method.

And so the gospel, it comes in two movements. We saw last week that first it says, I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe. And then we look to Christ's saving work as our only hope for salvation.

And then it follows that up with I am more, as a Christian, I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope. And it is only by remaining connected to the one through whom God's love was made manifest that I can truly find any way forward in this life.

The gospel is our protection. And then finally, Paul lays out our path ahead, which I mentioned we'll look at even more on Wednesday night as well as in the coming weeks.

[25 : 16] Paul's going to really give us the practical application of these truths. For now, we'll just say that the path ahead is to remain in the gospel. It's in God's word.

Hebrews 1, 1 and 2, in the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, that is the Old Testament. And in these last days, He's spoken to us by His Son, that is the New Testament.

That we read the Bible together, we read the Bible alone, we read the Bible on Sundays, we hear the word proclaimed, we read the Bible in the middle of the week, we read people steeped in the Bible because it's all about proclaiming who Christ is and what He's done.

The whole scriptures from beginning to end shouts the good news of Jesus Christ. And God grows us up as well through the sacraments, which is baptism in the Lord's Supper.

And not in some sort of mystical way, but in a way in which we get to see with our eyes the truth that Scripture proclaims. So when someone is baptized, we watch as they are buried with Christ symbolically and raised again, symbolizing and sealing what has happened to them in Christ, as well as pointing us forward to the final resurrection.

[26 : 36] We see the gospel played out there. We see the gospel in the Lord's Supper when we hold the bread and we are reminded that it was Christ's body that was broken for us.

And then we take the cup and we are reminded that we are people of the new covenant, which was sealed in His blood, which was shed for us. These are the tangible, visible reminders of who Christ is and what He's done on our behalf.

So we have the word and sacrament and then finally prayer and worship. Paul says in 1 Timothy 2, I urge you that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made.

I desire that in every place men should pray lifting holy hands. And we'll see at the end of Colossians as Paul reminds the church in Colossae that Epaphras, the church planter, their original pastor, that he wrestles for them in prayer.

And we're reminded that we don't have to invent new voices to listen to us. We don't have to have hallucinatory or visionary dreams to talk to somebody. God has given us a means to hear and to speak to Him and it's through prayer.

[27 : 49] And I would also say worship is a response to the Gospel as well which propels us forward. Paul's going to say in Colossians 3.16, let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

And so we hear the Gospel through God's Word. We see the Gospel and the sacraments of baptism and supper and we respond to the Gospel in prayer and worship. It's a relational life.

Let me say that again. The Christian life is a relational life lived in Christ by the power of His Spirit to the glory of the Father. And the way in which God's people grow is to just remain in Christ.

And there's a certain amount of faith that we have that as long as we remain in Christ, we remain in His Word, we continue to be His people, we continue in prayer and worship and to do the things He's commanded in baptism and the Lord's Supper that He will grow us in our faith.

He will sanctify us. He will perfect His love within us. And so we don't come up with new methods. We don't come up with new rules or regulations.

[29 : 07] We don't come up with new ways to experience spirituality. We continue to remember we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and we are grown up in Him alone.

For He is the head and He is the one through whom God causes the body to grow. So let's not be like the Israelites at Sinai and come up with new ways forward.

Let's not be like those of first century Colossae and invent new methods of sanctification or new ways by which to measure someone's spirituality. Let's not look to the culture around us and find new methods for proving that we are worthy of God's love.

Let's recognize in God's Word He has said that yes, we are far more fallen than we realize, but He has been far more gracious than we could ever hope for. He has saved us and He will continue to sanctify us.

He will continue to set us apart. He will present us holy and blameless in His sight through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[30 : 13] So we remain in Christ. We abide in His Word. We see Him at work in the sacraments and we respond to Him in prayer and worship. It's that simple. It's a life lived in Christ.

Let's pray. Father, we recognize that all of us are guilty of coming up with new methods that we think will please You.

That all of us at times have listened to others in ways that we think we can be a better person. Or we've even drawn idols up out of our own heart and turned to those instead of You.

We recognize, Father, we really, on our own, we're no better than the Israelites at the base of Sinai. We recognize that we need help not only in coming to faith but in growing in our faith.

Would You remind us, Lord, that in the same way You brought us to faith in Your Son. You will grow us in our faith in Your Son, Jesus Christ. Would we be pressed upon our minds the seriousness of the situation of not being in Christ?

[31 : 38] Would we remember that lies always have this appealing surface to them? That truth is only found in Your Word. Would You keep us from listening to others or listening to ourselves, Lord, but would You steep us in Christ in the good news of who He is and who we are because of Him.

We trust, Lord, that You will grow us, that You will sanctify us, that we will be presented holy and blameless before You, all because of and for the sake of Jesus Christ.

In His name we pray. Amen. If you stand with me, we'll have one more song and then we'll close with a benediction. The song is very simple.

It's just called All I Have is Christ.