

Colossians: The Supremacy of Christ (Col. 2:8-15)

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, you good? In the year 399 BC, Socrates, the father of Western philosophy, was put on trial! For not worshiping the gods of Athens and for corrupting the youth. His disciple Plato recorded! Socrates unsuccessfully defending himself and choosing death to death.

Over exile, he uttered these famous last words, the unexamined life is not worth living. Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, and their thinking and their call for self-examination has in fact shaped western civilization for 2500 years. Socrates died but his words and ideas lived on.

Maybe you're someone who spends, whose life is driven by this pursuit of self-examination. Maybe not. Maybe your life is driven by other things. Maybe your life is driven by the desire of people in your life. Friends, a romantic partner, marriage, children, grandchildren. Maybe that is the guiding narrative of your life.

Maybe your life is driven by any of those things. But maybe your life is driven by other things. Money, things that money can buy, your favorite leisurely activity. Maybe those are the things that drive your life.

Maybe it's none of those things. Maybe your life is perhaps driven by the even more fleeting thing of wanting likes from people that you've never met.

[2 : 0 1] But no matter what it is, something is driving our thoughts, words, and actions. They are shaped by things that are often beyond ourselves. We are often under the influence of larger currents that are actually invisible to us, but are very powerful in shaping us.

That recognition actually provides the appropriate context for us to receive this exhortation that Rob just read, see to it that no one takes you captive.

God the Spirit inspired Paul to write this to correct wayward Christians, but also to encourage the faithful people by telling them to pay attention to this. God the Spirit also preserved this writing for us because we need to hear this, not just the original readers in Colossae. God the Spirit is also now working to teach and train us in this so that we can live as God wants us to live.

Here's the truth. Jesus is the only way to God. Here's something that is also true. There are countless ways we deviate from this truth. The number of possible ways we deviate from this truth cannot be counted.

So one of the patterns that we see in Paul's letters is that even though he is often writing to correct errors, the focus is on the truth. And the errors being corrected are often brought up only indirectly as examples of deviating from the truth. So a practical reason could be that Paul knew the issue.

[4 : 0 5] Obviously the people who are receiving the letter knew what the issue was that Paul was writing about. So perhaps he was saying that there's no point to bringing it up again. We all know what the issue is.

Maybe that's one reason why the errors are not explicitly addressed. But perhaps a deeper reason is that Paul decided that they're not worth the paper on which they were written.

He chooses to focus on the truth and the errors being corrected are often brought up only parenthetically as a way, as an example of what happens when they deviate from the truth. So with that context, let's look at verse 8 and it says, see to it. See to it is a call to pay attention to something.

See to it that no one takes you captive. Here's the thing. We are not spiritual free agents who live in a vacuum.

We are constantly under the influence of someone or something. We are captive either to Christ or to things in opposition to Christ.

[5 : 2 0] And so Paul thanks God that the believers are in Christ. In Christ is a phrase that Paul uses more than a hundred times in his letters as a way of reminding that that everything about our

being is bound up in Christ. So he wants the believers to remember that they are in Christ.

We belong to Christ, but Christ's enemy has his envious eyes on Christ's flock. So it matters a great deal who controls you because God's enemy is a thief who steals and destroys.

But Christ is the good shepherd who offers us abundant life. So it matters a great deal who controls us, Christ or things not of Christ.

With all that seriousness, however, the warning here, see to that no one takes you captive. It's not explicitly referring to God's enemy directly, but to other false teachers who promote a philosophy and empty deceit according to human traditions and not in accordance with elementary principles of spirits and not according to Christ.

The word philosophy, if you break it down, it quite simply means love of wisdom. Love of wisdom is something that God's word explicitly tells us to pursue.

[6 : 56] Proverbs and James, God's word explicitly and repeatedly tells us to pursue wisdom. So this is not condemning philosophy per se, but it is talking about warning against a particular way of thinking that is not aligned with Christ.

And that is empty and deceitful. So these things, we are told, are according to human tradition.

What is this thing according to human tradition that we are warned against?

Again, we have to use scripture to understand scripture. Earlier, during his earthly ministry, Jesus warned against Pharisees and the scribes by quoting Isaiah.

He said that they, these Pharisees and scribes, were teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. They are taking some human wisdom, human structures, and teaching them as if they were God's commands.

That is something that Jesus explicitly criticized the Pharisees for. And this is something that Paul is expecting that the readers have some context for understanding this.

[8 : 12] So these human traditions could actually be religious. So we need to be discerning which human traditions masquerade as God's laws.

There are human traditions that masquerade as God's laws. And we are told to be attentive to them and avoid them. Because they will take you captive.

And that, from the gospels, from the teachings of Jesus, there is a backdrop to what Paul is saying here. So that category of human traditions that are masquerading as God's laws, that's one example of this human tradition that Paul is telling us to avoid.

But that's not the only category of empty and deceitful teaching. They, and we, need to discern what are these things according to the elementary principles, New American Standard, ESV translates it as elementary spirits of the world, that we are supposed to avoid.

That warning has many layers to it. So if you're using the ESV, ESV translates it as elementary spirits. So where does that come from? So the first layer of translation that we have to avoid these elementary spirits comes from what Paul tells the Galatians.

[9 : 42] So in Galatians 4, Paul tells them, Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved. Remember? Captive.

You were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you've come to know God, or rather be known by God, how can you turn back again to those weak and worthless elementary principles of this world whose slaves you want to be once more?

Paul is exasperated. And that backdrop, and also that this passage talks about rulers and authorities in heavenly places, is the reason why the ESV and some other translations choose to translate this term as, don't be captive to these elementary spirits.

So avoiding deceiving spirits is one true, but a narrow understanding of this warning. There's more to it.

The word here is actually very simply stoichia, is the word we get the English word, elements. If you have taken high school chemistry, they give you the periodic table of all the elements, hydrogen, helium, lithium, and all of those things.

[11 : 00] So yes, those elements, but in the Greco-Roman world, in their understanding, the elements of those world were earth, water, wind, and fire. Now, what does he mean that don't be captive to those things?

You see, the problem was that it wasn't merely that the Greeks and the Romans considered earth, water, wind, and fire as the elements of the world. The problem was that they also ascribed a divine nature to these physical elements.

The problem has not gone away. To this day, we have cultures and subcultures that ascribe living powers, spiritual powers, to things like mountains and rivers and planets.

This is something God explicitly warns Israel in Deuteronomy as they're entering into this new land. And God explicitly tells them, don't think like that.

Don't buy into that. That warning that was given more than 3,000 years ago is just as relevant for us today as it was for them then. We ought not to give these elements of the world any, we ought not to ascribe any meaning and spiritual power.

[12:19] So to not buy into this pantheistic worldview is another layer of this warning that Paul gives here. And yet the warning is even deeper than not buying into these spiritual beings or even to pantheistic worldview.

The warning here is broader. It is against any tradition or a way of thinking that's not of God because it will take you captive.

This includes an undue emphasis on a harsh treatment of the body. Next week, as we come to verses 16 to 23, you will see that there is a warning on making too much of, you got to observe the right holidays, you got to have circumcision, you got to have, you got to not eat this, not drink that. All of those things, these dietary restrictions, all of those things, Paul calls this, they are these false way of thinking that are going to hold you captive. The false teachers treated these human practices as if they had spiritual powers.

Yes, the enemy is more than happy to co-opt them to hold us captive, but the reality is that these practices, dietary restrictions, I'm not going to eat that, I'm not going to drink that, I'm going to observe these holidays, I'm going to follow these rules, none of those things have any inheritance inherent power.

[14:00] These things are inherently powerless unless we give them power over us. And that is the context here of Paul's warning to the Colossians.

Now, as you're listening to this and reading this, it's easy to point fingers at these Colossians. What? These people are so gullible to think that these things could actually have any control over them.

No, we're not any better than them. We give power over us to things that inherently have no power, and yet we let them have power over us, and so we need to invite God to speak to us through this text.

The point here is that only Christ, who is above all rule and authority, must have control over us. while God tabernacled with Israel for a period, and then dwelt temporarily in the temple for a period, God now dwells eternally with His believers.

Christ's incarnate body was physical. His resurrected body was also physical in a superior way. His ascended body was once again this resurrected physical body, and He advocates for us at the right hand of God in His physical form.

[15:25] So there is this bodily resurrection of Christ that is spoken of in verse 9, for in Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form. Because of Christ, God fully identifies with the believer.

God fully and forever identifies with us in Christ. God does not merely give us His partial attention. There is nothing incomplete in God's love and care for us. The fullness of Christ is ours.

A couple of weeks ago, we saw from Colossians 1, 15 through 20, in verse 19, he talks about the fullness of Christ is ours because we are in Christ.

That's the passage, that's the phrase that Paul uses over and over again. Because the fullness of deity lives in bodily form in Christ, believers in Christ are eternally bound to God because we are filled by Christ to be complete in every way.

[16:36] When John introduces Jesus in the opening passage in John 1, he says that from His fullness, we have all received grace upon grace.

The point here is that there is nothing incomplete that God has given to us in Christ. There is a fullness that God has given to us in Christ. And Paul repeats this in Ephesians 3.

Let me read this passage from Ephesians 3. Paul says, In Christ, we have everything we can imagine and more.

And Paul is saying, What else do you need? God has given us everything. God has given us His fullness in Christ. And Paul is saying, So why are you being captive to something else?

Because Christ is superior to every ruler and authority, and His thoughts and ways are way better than ours. We must not pledge ultimate allegiance to rulers that are below Christ.

[18 : 10] Yet we repeatedly fall for this. In the garden, the enemy deceived our first parents by telling them that God is withholding something good from you and that He has something better.

We fall for that over and over again. We settle for the inferior when we already have the superior. And that is the truth that Paul proceeds to emphasize in the next five verses in 11 through 15.

He wants the Colossians and us to think about two implications of the fact that the fullness of God in Christ is ours.

We already have everything. So He gives two examples of things that are inferior that we allow us to take as captive.

The first implication of the supremacy of Christ for believers who are in Him relates to circumcision.

I don't know about you, but I don't exactly spend a lot of time thinking about circumcision.

[19 : 24] But the early church did. This was a major theological issue that was addressed repeatedly in the New Testament.

Acts 15, the famous council in Jerusalem, following that in Acts 16 when Paul takes Timothy to be circumcised. Galatians, the major theme, is about circumcision. This is a theme that shows up over and over again in the New Testament because it was a serious stumbling block for the early Christians.

So to understand what the real issue is, we need to understand what circumcision is and what it is not. We're not told exactly what was the issue about circumcision.

He brings up circumcision. So let's understand what it is and what it's not so that we have some framework for navigating this. Circumcision is a practice that many human cultures throughout the world have practiced for a long time.

And when God institutes circumcision as a sign of His covenant with Abraham, the point is that it is a permanent mark of belonging.

[20 : 40] But the key here is that it's a mark of belonging. Circumcision doesn't by itself put one into a covenant.

This wedding ring is a symbol that I'm married. But just wearing a ring automatically doesn't make one married. We are prone to confusing the symbol with the thing that it ultimately represents.

So circumcision by itself doesn't accomplish anything. It's only because God entered into a covenant and this is a sign of the covenant that it had any value.

Yet as serious as this was, people made this mistake over and over again by mistaking the symbol for the thing that it ultimately represented.

Moses, as he was charged in leading Israel out of Egypt, had not circumcised his sons. And God was very angry with Moses to the point of putting him to death.

[21 : 44] But the issue was not about the act, but what it represented, namely that Moses didn't really trust God's covenant with Abraham. There was still underlying skepticism that God was getting to.

But we confuse the symbol with the real thing. This mark is merely a symbol of acknowledging God's promise to his people.

But we confuse the symbol with the real thing, namely that is God's love that matters. Even in the Old Testament, people understood this. Moses speaks about it repeatedly in Deuteronomy, that is his farewell address to Israel.

He tells Israel repeatedly that what he really wants, not his physical circumcision, but a circumcision of the heart. And later in Jeremiah, as God is preparing Israel for a new covenant, God tells Israel once again, what God is really looking for is a circumcision of the heart.

Not some physical body part, but a circumcision of the heart, namely a heartfelt belonging belonging to the Lord, not just in physical appearance.

[23 : 01] We confuse some external conformity with a heartfelt acknowledgement and trust in God. And that is what is getting at.

Circumcision was a sign of trust. It had no power in itself. Do not mistake a symbol for a thing that it ultimately represents.

Because circumcision had no power by itself. Worse yet, somehow, if magically circumcision had some power, the problem was that the old covenant through Moses and Abraham before him was not nearly as good as the new covenant sealed in the blood of Christ.

And believers in Christ already had the better covenant. So Paul is saying, so why do you want to go back to the inferior covenant? If you have a job contract, if you have a job offer written in

contract, that's a much better offer, why would you want to go back to a less worse offer? So Paul is saying, you are going back to something that is inferior when you already have the superior, and that is the teaching that he's speaking about with circumcision.

[24 : 15] We don't know the extent to which these false teachers were telling people to get circumcised. That's not explicit. But what we do know, when you look at the next passage we'll look at next week, they had a lot of confidence in their flesh.

They thought that rules and all these disciplines were adequate to conquer our sinful tendencies. They thought that if you were disciplined enough, you could overcome the enemy's forces and obtain forgiveness of sins.

Their elaborate rules about what to eat, what not to eat, what holidays to observe, all of those things were both ineffective and unnecessary because Christ had already accomplished it on the cross for believers.

When it speaks about the circumcision of Christ, it's a metaphor for the death of the old nature. Paul speaks to it in Romans 6. It's a metaphor for the death of the old nature and the new birth that he tells the Corinthians.

For if you're in Christ, the old is gone, the new has come because of the finished work of Christ. The finished work of Christ is superior because Christ is superior and says, he tells the believers that you already have the superior in Christ.

[25 : 48] So, don't fall captive to it is one implication that Paul talks about. The second implication he talks about has to do with baptism. Again, he's using baptism to illustrate both the supremacy and the sufficiency of Christ for believers who are in him.

like circumcision, baptism is inherently powerless! Just for the simple fact that lots of people get dunked in the pool all the time.

That by itself has no power to do anything. It is inherently powerless but it is significant only because of what Christ has already done.

Paul talked about this in a slightly longer form in Romans 6 verses 3 to 8. In those six verses Paul elaborates on something that he just mentions in passing over here is that baptism is a metaphor just like circumcision.

It's a metaphor for the believer to identify with the death and resurrection of Christ. There, in that Romans 6 passage, Paul distinguished between what happened in the past, what are the present implications and what we are still waiting for in baptism the resurrection.

[27 : 12] So, it's a visible representation of the invisible work of God to bring forth new life in a believer and that is the emphasis here.

Again, because of what Christ has done and because we are in Christ, there are these implications for the believer which is far better than anything we can hope to accomplish for ourselves and that's the point he is making here for them.

Baptism is for believers and all believers should be baptized as an act of obedience to the Lord and as a witness to proclaim what the Lord has done for us.

So, in doing so, we are proclaiming this is what the Lord has done for me. So, these accomplishments of Christ are superior to anything that we can hope to accomplish for ourselves. So, Paul is saying don't get caught up in things that are inferior because you already have the superior. And when continuing to talk about what Christ has accomplished, Paul specifically talks about two things that Christ accomplished on the cross.

[28 : 26] As we go through this in verses 13-14, 13-14, and 15, he talks about two things that Christ accomplished on the cross. The first thing that Christ accomplished on the cross is the propitiation for our sin.

That is the emphasis of verses 13-14. And the second thing that Christ accomplished was that he triumphed over all physical and spiritual rulers and authorities that oppose him.

So, 13-14 talking about propitiation for our sins. Second, triumph over all rulers and authorities. And they are both necessary to understand what Christ has accomplished.

Not one or the other, but both. Let's look at the first one, the propitiation for our sin, that is the focus of verses 13-14. The specific language that is used here is that in verse 14, is a certificate of death. Our sin is a certificate of death and, by the law of God, the warrant for our death. It represents both our debt and our death because it stands before God.

[29 : 45] The enemy of God and our enemy, he is an accuser. That's literally his name. He is an accuser. And we are told in scripture that he accuses us before God all the time.

He reminds God and us of the penalty of the certificate of debt that we have to God. Now notice that we owe this debt to God.

We don't owe anything to Satan. This certificate of debt is the debt that we owe to God. What is this debt? First, simply, in creation, we owe God everything.

God created us out of nothing. We, God created everything. God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing and God created us. So, we owe to God everything because he created us.

And in the Mosaic Law, our spiritual ancestors also owed God obedience to live by the law of God. But in all of those cases, we repeatedly fail God both in our created obligation but also in our covenantal obligations.

[31 : 03] We owe this debt to God and as a result, all sin is an offense against God. Every sin is an offense against God.

That does not mean that we don't commit sins against one another. We do it all day. all day we sin against one another and yet all sin is ultimately against God.

David recognized this. There are many prominent sins of David we can speak of. I'm going to speak of one that is familiar to many of us that he stole another man's wife and had this man killed so that he can have this man's wife.

And for the death of that man and for this adultery with this woman, he sinned against so many people. He sinned against that man, he sinned against his wife, that dead man's wife, he sinned against his own family, he sinned against the army because the man that he had killed was a faithful soldier who was fighting on behalf of him, so he sinned against his army, he sinned against his nation.

The number of sins that David committed in this is a long list. And yet, in Psalm 51 4, as he reflects on all of this, he tells God, against you and only you have I sinned.

[32 : 26] Because he understands that all the things that he did wrong to everybody around him, all of those things, ultimately, the ultimate offense is against God himself.

So, the certificate of debt is the debt that we owe God, and we cannot repay. And therefore, the warrant is for our debt.

And that is what Paul is speaking about here, the certificate of debt and death. Because all debt is owed only to God, or ultimately to God, only God can forgive sin.

sin. Now, to be sure, for we who have experienced grace, when people sin against us, we are called to forgive the sins that we commit against each other, because God has forgiven us.

But because all sin is ultimately against God, only God can forgive sin, because all the debt is owed to him.

[33 : 34] Now, here's the thing about forgiveness. forgiveness. In forgiveness, somebody still has to pay. Suppose I owe you money, and then I realize that I cannot pay it back.

And because you want to forgive me, you say, okay, I forgive you of the debt. But guess what? You still have to bear the cost of what I owed you.

forgiveness is costly for the person extending forgiveness. When God forgives us, it's not that he can simply say, oh, just forget about it, we're good.

No, forgiveness is costly because sin still has to be paid. but here is our God. Even though all debt of every person's sin is owed to God, he forgave us by taking that debt, all the payment for our sin, upon himself in Christ on the cross.

like Adam, we owe love and obedience to God, but we fail. But the last Adam lived as we should have lived and paid the debt that we should have paid so that we are forgiven of our sin.

[35 : 07] This is the heart of the good news. When we recognize how much God has forgiven us, forgiven us of our sins, that puts everything else in perspective.

Horatius Spafford, while reflecting on unspeakable pain of his life of losing his children, he recognized that the key to transcending every trial and having peace in every sorrow is to remember, even at the deepest of life's hardships, is to remember what the cross of Christ means for us.

he sings, my sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul.

In the worst of things that life can bring, in his case, the death of his children, he remembers that because Christ has paid for all his sins, that puts every sorrow, every trial, every hardship into perspective, and that is the ultimate reason for joy.

That is the heart of the good news. Our first birth nature leads us to death. Our second birth nature from God leads us to eternal life with him.

[36 : 38] This is the finality and completeness of Christ's work on the cross for which we praise God in the midst of whatever hardship life comes our way, whatever challenges life comes our way, we have this, and this cannot be taken away from us because Christ has paid it all.

As significant as that is, but wait, there's more. He goes on in 15, the magnificence of the cross of Christ is too great for it to be only have private and personal implications for us.

As great as the propitiation of sins is, it is the reason for ultimate joy, as I just said, but there's more. It's not just a private and personal implication, there is a public and a cosmic implication for Christ has done, and that is the focus of the next part.

The public defeat of Satan was a promise that God made at the very rebellion of Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3, 4, 15, God had promised that the head of the serpent will be crushed.

This is a promise right from the get-go that there is going to be a public defeat of Satan. This was something that he prophesied again in Isaiah 49, and Jesus reiterated it many times in Matthew 12, Luke 11, John 12, Jesus repeated many times about the public defeat of Satan.

[38 : 20] And to understand the illustration used for this public defeat of Satan, Paul uses something that his original audience in the Roman world would have understood.

In the Roman world, when an emperor or a general achieves a great victory in a battle, the reward for it, the recognition for it, is a parade through the Roman forum.

In Rome, well, there are different forums, so this public place, the winning general or emperor is given a parade. He's welcomed into the city in a parade, and this winning, this conquering emperor, leads captives, all those he has defeated in the battle, for the whole of Rome to see, here is this king, he has achieved victory, here are all the people that he defeated, the defeated people are paraded behind the winning king.

And that is the picture that Paul uses here of a public display of victory. victory. That public parade accomplished two things.

First, it declared the greatness and reminded everybody that nobody could oppose him. If this was true of Roman kings and emperors and generals who lived and died, how great is the greatest victory that the king of all kings has accomplished?

[39 : 52] this is not going to be a private matter, folks. What Christ has accomplished will be made known to all heaven and earth that he created. What Christ has accomplished on the cross has to be declared for all creation to see and give God the glory.

And that is a point that's addressed here. God makes a public display for all heaven and earth to see what Christ has done. In doing so, we are told, he rendered all these other rulers and authorities, he rendered them impotent against him.

There's nothing that they can do. Beautiful thing about this procession, Paul tells the Corinthians that he is one of those who's being paraded in that procession.

All the believers, we have to rejoice that Christ has defeated our old nature. that we surrendered to Christ, that he is our conqueror.

He holds us captive because only in him there is fullness of life and joy. The only difference is that in the victory procession of Christ, believers who surrendered to him are forgiven, are adopted, and made fellow heirs with Christ.

[41 : 17] God makes his former enemies who fought against him in our sin. He makes us fellow heirs with him. But those who remain opposed to him are judged and condemned.

One will celebrate the victory, others will mourn God's judgment. Through that, all creation will acknowledge that Christ is sovereign, Christ is superior, and Christ is sufficient.

all of this is because of the cross of Christ. That's why the cross of Christ is the ultimate manifestation of the holiness of God, and therefore the cross is the pinnacle of the glory of God. And the beautiful thing that Paul tells the Ephesians in Ephesians 3.10 is that the church is God's chosen instrument to declare the glory of God, not just to the ends of the earth, but to all heaven and earth.

We become the instrument of declaring the glory of God to all creation, heaven and earth. And that's why how we live this redeemed life matters.

[42 : 38] Paul had told the Corinthian believers to take every thought captive to obey Christ. As captives of Christ, our minds and our hearts must be captivated by Christ.

He is all we need. Be intentional individually and corporately not to be captive to anything else. Go back to the examples I started with.

What captivates you? what drives your thinking? What drives your thoughts, words, and actions in life? Whether you realize it or not, every one of us is captive to something that drives the bus of our lives.

Is Christ the one who is holding us captive? Or is it something else? as great as Socrates' reminder was about an self-examined life, self-examination, while good, is only of modest help.

What we really need introspection guided by the Holy Spirit and informed by God's word and affirmed by mature believers around us who speak truth and love to one another, that is what's necessary for us to be truly captivated and captured by Christ and not by anything else.

[44 : 12] us. But we do so because when as the church, when as the body of Christ, for those of us who are in him, when we live in community with one another, when we speak truth and love to one another, when we read God's word together, when we invite the Holy Spirit to illuminate his word together so that we can be conformed to Christ, we become the instruments through which Christ is glorified in all earth and all heaven and there is no greater joy than that.

So let us resolve to be captivated only by Christ. Please join me in prayer. thank you Lord Jesus that you are sovereign.

Thank you that you are supreme. Thank you Lord Jesus that you are sufficient. Thank you for your completed work on the cross.

Thank you that it is finished. But thank you also that we have the privilege of the indwelling of your Holy Spirit who illuminates your word so that we can apply what you have accomplished for us.

I pray that our lives will be captivated by you and you alone that our thoughts, words and actions would be reflections of the beauty of Christ to all creation so that you may be glorified in and through our lives.

[45 : 42] For it is in your name that we pray. Amen.