

Threats to the Christ-Centred Life

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word and we pray tonight that you might cause us to have open ears to hear it and that you might drive us toward faith and obedience.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. In the 1930s, the historian William Shearer was sent to India to cover the rise of the independence movement in India.

And he watched one of the great men of the 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi, as he launched the civil disobedience campaign. And he watched Gandhi, he talked to Gandhi, and Gandhi became his friend, took him into his confidence.

And in his memoirs, Shearer remembered Gandhi and reflected on the influence that this man had had upon him. Listen to his words. He says this. Gandhi was my greatest teacher.

Not only by what he said and wrote, but by the example that he said, I suppose the greatest single thing for him was to seek the truth. To shun hypocrisy and falseness and glibness.

[1 : 02] To try to be truthful to oneself as well as to others. To be sceptical of the value of most of life's prizes, especially the material ones. To cultivate an inner strength.

To be tolerant of others, of their acts, of their beliefs, however much they jar you, but intolerant of your own faults. To stick to your beliefs and values when you thought they were right.

Never selling out in exchange for personal gain or cowardice. There was much that Gandhi taught me. The value of contemplation and how to achieve it in the midst of the pressures and distractions of life.

The necessity of disciplining your mind and body and keeping your greeds and your lusts and your selfishness and your worldly ambitions in check. The obligation to love, to forgive and not to hate.

To eschew violence and to understand the power of non-violence. Gandhi must have been an impressive man. Some would call him a saint. And even those who would not go that far would agree that he was a model of godliness and deep spirituality.

[2 : 05] Now it is the question of godliness and spirituality that I want to talk about today. And I want to start off by getting you to think what people in our world mean by the terms godliness and spirituality.

That is if they're thinking about them in positive ways. What does godliness look like? What are the characteristics of godliness in our world? What are the marks of a godly person?

What are its defining characters? What sets them apart from the rest of us? And what makes them special? What are the characteristics of godliness? Now when I gave this some thought, I came up with what I think are four general characteristics that I think the people of this world would say, yeah, this is what makes a godly person.

Four things that mark them out. My list is not exhaustive. You might add some extras. But here are four to give a try to. I'm not saying that every godly person has all of these characteristics.

But I am saying that if we speak of godliness or spirituality as our world does, then the person we will consider godly will probably have one or all of these characteristics.

[3 : 08] They'll be distinguished by one or all of these things. And here they are. Number one, the godly person is a person of knowledge. In other words, they're a person who has some sort of special knowledge of God, perhaps some special insight into the way God operates in the world.

And Gandhi appears to have been a man like that, or at least the world would say he is. He had opinions regarding God and truth. His opinions were deep and influential and still influencing the world today.

They've been taken up by many people since. And so a godly person is a person who has some knowledge and understanding. The godly person, number two, is a good person.

In other words, the godly person is a person who's marked by an exemplary life. Their lifestyle, their habits, their conduct, their behavior is what the world would consider good.

Again, Gandhi was a man like this. He was a man of virtue and care. He had the interests of others constantly in mind and he shunned evil and delighted in the good. He was a good man.

[4 : 11] And the godly person, we would think, yeah, is a good person. Three, the godly person is a sacrificial person. Now what I mean here is that the godly person is generally a person who's willing to sacrifice things in order to achieve godliness or goodness.

And that is the facet, I think, of most religions. For example, Gandhi believed that the truly godly person would shun sexual activity. Do you know that for large slaves of his life, he even denied himself sexual gratification even with his wife.

So sacrifice and self-denial, they are the marks of the godly person. The godly person, we think, yeah, is a person willing to sacrifice things. A fourth, the godly person is a person of deep religious experience.

Now what I mean here is that the godly person in our world is a person who we think has probably got some special experience of god. They're a person who not only has a knowledge about god, but has experienced god, met god.

The godly person has a range of spiritual experience that we think is probably above the average, above that of normal people. So they are a person of deep religious experience.

[5 : 23] Now if these are some of the characteristics of godliness, then it seems to me that the secret of becoming godly is quite clear. At least in theory. And that, if these are the characteristics of godliness, then what's the secret to growing godly?

It's to grow in those characteristics, isn't it? Then you too would be godly. And so those who earnestly desire to be godly will always be found working on these things. They'll work on increasing their knowledge of god.

They'll work on increasing the degree that they're willing to sacrifice and deny themselves in order to attain godliness. They'll work on increasing their depth of spiritual experience and contact with god himself.

In our world, the way to become godly, I think we would think, if we think positively about it, is to increase in our lives the characteristics of godliness.

Now, Paul's letter to the Colossians has something to say about this as well. And we began to see this last week, you might remember, and we're going to see it again this week. The verses that we look at today are addressed to people like you and me.

[6 : 31] And they're addressed to people, therefore, who wish to increase their godliness. They address people who want to be more in contact with god and who want to act in a way that pleases god.

So let's have a look at what these verses have to say, because they really are quite revolutionary if you look at them. Let's start with what we identified last week as the heart of the book. Remember, I said there are two verses that lie at the very heart of this book and in this section of Christian living. Look at verses 6 to 7 of chapter 2 of Colossians with me. Paul says, So then, just as you receive Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Now, since we explored these two verses in depth last week, we don't have to dwell much with them this week. In summary, we concluded that the thrust of these verses was that Christians should go on the way that they started.

That is, they should go back and have a look at what they know about Jesus, and they should never leave it. Now, you might remember our analogy from last week. Do you remember it? I said that we walk into the future, that is, our future before God.

[7 : 40] We walk backwards into the future, looking back at what God has done in Christ. And that is, that's how we progress in the Christian life. The Christian life is Christ-centered from beginning to end, from when we first came to know Christ and on into eternity.

It's constantly focused on Jesus, constantly looking back at who he is and what he has done. So if the Christian godly life is all about starting and finishing with Jesus, then what are, do you think, the threats to Christian living?

To Christ-centered living? Well, the first one, I think, is the most obvious one. It's to get your thinking wrong. To listen to the teaching that heads you away from Jesus.

And verses 8 to 15 of Colossians 2 speak about a dangerous teaching that has apparently become prevalent amongst the Colossian Christians. It's a teaching which, Paul thinks, threatens them. You see, rather than being full of Jesus, he says, have a look there, he says, it's hollow and deceptive. And it threatens to take them captive. You see, it doesn't depend on Jesus and the things that Paul taught them about Jesus when they first became Christians.

[8 : 51] Rather, it depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world. Look at verse 8. Look at what Paul says. He says, see to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world, rather than on Christ.

Now, if you look at verse 9, you get a hint as to some of the content of this hollow and deceptive teaching. First, it seems to be saying that fullness and security can be found other than in Jesus. Secondly, this hollow and deceptive philosophy implies that Christians are not already complete or filled in Jesus. In other words, this hollow and deceptive philosophy implies believing in Jesus is not the whole story.

Walking on into the future focused on Jesus. No, that's not the whole story. Believing in Jesus doesn't make the Christian complete. And it's this teaching that Paul addresses in verses 9 to 15. And he has four points. And I'm just going to summarize them and point out how I think they come from the passage. Look at them with me. Point one is that when Jesus died, they died. I think this is what the difficult language of verse 11 means.

[10 : 09] It's certainly what is meant in the first half of verse 12. They were buried with Christ in baptism. You see, when Christ died and then they went and got baptized, they were buried with Christ.

They died with him. Point two is that when Jesus was raised in one sense, they were raised with him. You can see that in the second half of verse 12.

You can see that in verse 13, where Paul talks about them now being having died with Christ, now being alive with Christ. So point one, they died in Christ.

Point two, they were raised with Christ and they're now alive with him. Point three, they are forgiven. You can see that in verses 13 and 14. That is, the record of their failure is nailed to the cross and died with Christ on the cross.

Point four is in verse 15. In verse 15, Paul says that any spiritual forces they're worried about have been defeated at the cross. They've been disarmed.

[11 : 14] He says they've been put to shame. They've been triumphed over by Christ and his work on the cross. Now, those four points, when you think about it, present an overwhelming picture, don't they?

Yes, the Colossian Christians were alienated from God. They were enemies in their minds. They were evil in their behavior. But now, well, now they've been reconciled to God through the death of Jesus and they are now holy in his sight.

That is, they're without blemish. They're free from accusation. They have a full relationship with God. If you believed in Christ, then so will you. Isn't that remarkable?

And you and they, the Colossians, will continue to have a full relationship with God while ever you continue that Jesus alone is able to accomplish this. That is, while ever you've got your eyes focused there and you're walking on.

So continue on in the way you began. Hang on to Jesus. Believe in him. Remember 6 and 7? So then, just as you receive Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him.

[12 : 23] Rooted and built up in him. Strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness. So there's the first risk for us as Christians. Moving away from Christ-centeredness by accepting wrong teaching and beginning to think wrongly about what has happened to us.

Brings us to verses 16 to 23. In these verses, Paul shows how false teaching impacts your daily Christian life. I want you to try and imagine the context for a moment.

These people in Colossae, well, they've come to know Jesus. Then the false teachers came in. And these false teachers kept telling them they weren't complete in Christ. That is, there was still something lacking.

They were questioning how secure their relationship with God was. They were hinting that there were spiritual forces out there that needed to be combated in order for them to be secure. But more

than that, they aimed to show you how to become secure.

They taught various ways in which, well, you could actually improve your relationship with God and become more godly or spiritual. Now, from what I can work out from Colossians, these false teachers appear to have endorsed three basic methods of approach, right?

[13 : 37] Three basic methods of improving things. They thought that a thing called asceticism would help. I'm going to explain that in a moment. They thought that religious observance would help.

And they thought that if you had a deeper experience, that would help. And I'll explain each of those in order. So, first, asceticism. This is their first approach.

And let me try and explain it. Imagine for a moment that you think your relationship with God is not all it could be. How might you go about fixing it? Well, one way would be to think like this.

Look, things aren't all that they should be in my life. Things need to be improved. So how can I show God that I am really serious about him? Well, I can show him by denying myself some things that are pleasurable for me.

I can show him by sacrificing things that are important. I can say to him, look, I will give up anything for you. I'll give up certain foods. I'll give up sex. I'll give away all my money to the poor. Well, that's the approach of the ascetic.

[14 : 37] There's nothing wrong with doing some of those things. It is the approach of sacrifice and self-denial. But it's an approach which says only this way will I improve my relationship with God. A second approach might be improving your religious observance.

Here, I think, the thinking goes something like this. Look, my relationship with God is not all that it should be. It could be. Things need to be improved. So how can I show God that I'm serious about him?

Well, I can show him by showing that I'm willing to set aside sections of my life for him, special days for him. And I'll say these days are God's days. On these days, I will not do things that I do on other days.

On these days, I'll do things which I can't do on other days. These days are God days set aside for him. And I'll make sure that there are as many of them as possible.

This is the approach of religious observance. By keeping special occasions, you show God how important he is to you. Are you pleased, God?

[15 : 45] And therefore, you worry the evil spiritual forces that are set against God. Now, let me say that both the approach of the ascetic and the approach of religious observance have good pedigree, don't they?

Very good pedigree. You see, both were ways the Old Testament saints showed their devotion to God. They fasted. They held feasts. They celebrated God's great acts in history on special days. They kept the Sabbath. They abstained from sex on particular occasions. They ate certain foods and then they didn't eat other foods. But look at what Paul says in Colossians 2, 16 to 17 and 20 to 23.

Therefore, let no one judge you by what you eat or drink. Now, I think this means let no one judge who you are and how godly you are by these things.

Or with regard to religious festival or new moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come. The reality is found where? In Christ.

[16 : 47] Not in them themselves, but in Christ. Verse 20. Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of the 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 rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings.

Such regulations have the appearance of wisdom. And that is, they look like good godly things to be doing. With their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body.

You get the feeling that Paul's not so positive about them, don't you? But they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. They won't help you in the task of godliness.

Notice what Paul is saying. You see, a better relationship with God doesn't come from abstaining from certain things. Nor does it come from keeping religious festivals. That doesn't make you godly.

[17 : 46] Now, those things may look impressive. They look as though they might bring you close to God. However, they belong to a past age. They're a shadow of reality.

The reality is what? Jesus. Relationship with God is bound up with relationship with Jesus. And so if you want to be godly, then don't think that keeping rules and regulations and religious festivals will improve your standing with God.

No. Only Christ will make you free from accusation in God's sight. Only Jesus will bring you into relationship with God and keep you in relationship with God.

Now, do you remember verses 6 and 7? Have you memorised it yet? I hope you will in the days to come. Good on you, Philip. So, remember what it is? So then, just as you receive Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness.

Friends, please listen carefully. Don't go down the dead end paths. Don't leave Jesus. Because if you leave him, there's nowhere to go. Now, let's go back to our three approaches.

[19:04] In my view, the third approach looks and sounds a little more sophisticated. Okay, so we've had two. Let's go on to three. It's an approach that I think has been very common in recent history around the world.

It goes something like this. Look, things aren't all they should be in my relationship with God or could be. I think they need to improve. How can they be improved? Well, one way to improve them is to be more spiritually aware.

So, the more that I'm in contact with spiritual forces that stop me becoming more godly, the more godly I will become. So, how will this happen? Well, it will happen through my having some heightened spiritual experiences, through dreams and visions and special revelations, which will draw me closer and closer to God.

Through these, I'll be put in contact with the unseen world of angels and spiritual forces. I'll get to know and engage in this sort of spiritual experience. I'll come to know how these things operate. I'll be better informed, better equipped. This is the approach of the super spiritual person. You become a spiritual warrior. Better able to relate to God. Better able to keep in tune with him.

[20:10] Better able to be godly. Now, look at verses 18 to 19. Don't let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person goes into great detail about what they've seen.

They are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. Notice what he says about them. They have lost connection with the head. Lost connection with what? The head, that is Christ. From whom the whole body supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews grows as God causes it to grow. Can you hear what he's saying? A better relationship with God doesn't come through special religious knowledge.

Nor does it come through special religious experiences. Those things can look so, so impressive. And I think even we as Christians are caught up into it. Aren't we? We think if only I had that. Things would be secure. They're not the way forward. As I keep reminding you, Paul is clear that the way forward in the spiritual life is to go backward. Or at least to look backward and go forward.

[21:14] The way to get ahead is to return to Jesus. For Jesus is the head. He is the means of growth. Remember the words? So then, just as you receive Christ Jesus as Lord, continue your lives in him.

Rooted and built up in him. Strengthened in the faith as you were taught. And overflowing with thankfulness. You see how you're going to grow in godliness? By going back. Please understand, the value of asceticism to make you godly is nil.

It won't do the deed. The value of religious observance to make you godly is nil. The value of super spirituality to make you godly is nil. The thing that makes you godly is continued dependence upon Jesus.

It's continuing on in that faith you began with. It's not moving away. So when you first came to Christ, what did you do? You said, I have nowhere else to go.

I cannot make myself godly. But you can make me right with God. So I will put my faith and trust in you. Keep going on the same way you began.

[22:24] It's not moving away from the hope held out to you in the gospel. It's staying with that hope. Now I just want to close by reading to you from two Christian authors and making some reflections on their writings.

The first author is one of the great evangelical preachers of history. His name? George Whitefield. Now George Whitefield kept a diary.

And in his diary he recorded his aims for daily living. And the sorts of questions he thought were important for godly living. Let me read to you the list that he went through at the end of every day. Don't be overawed by this.

Listen. Every day he would ask himself. Have I been fervent in private prayer? Have I used the stated hours of prayer? Have I practiced?

Have I praised God with exclamation? That is, you know, with lots of energy. Every hour. Have I, after or before every deliberate conversation or action, considered how it might tend to God's glory? [23 : 25] Have I, after every pleasure, immediately given thanks? Have I planned business for the day? Have I been simple and recollected in everything?

Have I been zealous in undertaking and active in doing what good I could? Have I been meek, cheerful, affable in everything I said and did? Have I been proud, vain, unchaste or enviable of others?

Have I been recollected in eating, that is focused and so on, in eating and drinking, thankful, temperate in sleep? Have I taken time to give thanks? Have I been diligent in studies? Have I thought or spoken unkindly of everyone?

Have I confessed all sins? That's the end of every day you do this. How do you feel when you read such things? Do you know how I feel?

Pathetic. Guilty. Ungodly. Undisciplined and slack. And I'm embarrassed.

[24 : 28] And I feel a failure. And I wonder, how could God be happy with me? And then I read more of Whitfield's biography. And it makes things worse.

For he tells me that. I began to fast twice a week. For 36 hours together. Prayed many times a day. And received the sacrament every Lord's Day. I fasted myself almost to death all the 40 days of Lent.

During which I made it a point of duty never to go less than three times a day to public worship. Besides seven times a day to my private prayers. If you're feeling bad a little while ago, you're feeling really bad now, aren't you?

But then Whitfield helps me. For then Whitfield tells me what Paul tells me. For Whitfield closes this great collection by saying, Yet I knew no more that I was born to be a new creature in Christ Jesus than if I had never been born at all.

It's very telling, isn't it? In other words, Whitfield was, like Gandhi, godly by any criteria. In other words, Whitfield was right up there.

[25 : 46] But he says, but I didn't know real life with God. And I did not have a real relationship with the living God. Do you hear what Whitfield learnt?

He learnt that God is not so much pleased with abstinence and religious observance as with his son. And those who are in his son. You see, God requires simple trust in Jesus.

Not these other things. He may do some of these other things, but that's not what God requires of you. He requires trust in his son. God requires confidence in Jesus.

Not confidence in my own religiosity. And it isn't just in the area of commitment and morality that I feel insecure. Often I feel insecure in the area of religious experience as well.

I mean, perhaps you've been here as well. Let me explain what I mean. Since I became a Christian, I've constantly heard of people experiencing God in unusual ways. Some people hear special words from God.

[26 : 52] Others tell me that they've been in church meetings where they've had immediate contact with God. God has struck them in such a way that they've fallen to the ground in a daze. Or God has so overwhelmed them that they've even laughed for joy in his presence.

Or God has taken over their tongues so that they've found themselves speaking in languages they never learnt. Now I guess you've heard people talk that way too, haven't you? Talk about their experiences and you think, where am I?

I ain't had them. Now let me ask you again. How do you feel when you hear things like this? Do you know how I feel? I feel as though I might have missed something.

Often these people's experience of God seems so immediate, so exciting, so electric, so exhilarating. And I'm tempted to think to myself, I am so terribly godly, ungodly.

My experience of God is so wimpish. I'm a spiritual infant next to these people. And Paul says to me, no. No, under such thinking there lies a very deep heresy, you see.

[27 : 55] Have you received Christ? Then you are full. You are full. You died with Christ. You were buried with Christ.

You have risen to new life with Christ. You have Jesus and God has not got anything more to give. He's given his all in his son.

You have it all. So let me close by asking you the question I asked at the beginning. How do you work on your spirituality? On your godliness?

Well, Paul has been very clear. You go back to where you started. You return to the cross. You return to Jesus.

And you gaze upon him. And then you walk into the world. So then, just as you receive Christ Jesus the Lord, continue.

[28 : 56] Continue. Continue. Continue to live in him. Rooted and built up in him. Strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with gratitude. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ, who alone makes us right with you.

Who is alone the way we are measured before you. Help us, Father, to continue to live in him. Rooted and built up in him. Strengthened in the faith as we were taught. And overflowing with gratitude. For, Father, in Christ, we are right with you.

We are full in you. Because we are full of him. And full in him. Thank you for this.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Friends, next week we're going to look at a bit more details about... Because this doesn't mean we don't do anything in the Christian life. So next week we're going to look at some of the things we do do.

[30 : 02] But we have to ground things properly first, you see. That none of what we do will make us right with God. And so Paul has grounded things. Now he can move on to see, well, what's this mean tomorrow?

Amen.