

Letters From Paul – Session Two

Dear Colossians: Bad Theology Abounds

Colossians 2: 1-23

Paul's Words to the Colossian Church:

I wish you could know how much I have struggled for you and for the church in Laodicea, and for the many other friends I've yet to meet. ² I am contending for you that your hearts will be wrapped in the comfort of heaven and woven together into love's fabric. This will give you access to all the riches of God as you experience the revelation of God's great mystery—Christ.

³ For our spiritual wealth is in him, like hidden treasure waiting to be discovered— heaven's wisdom and endless riches of revelation knowledge.

⁴ I want you to know this so that no one will come and lead you into error through their persuasive arguments and clever words. ⁵ Even though I'm separated from you geographically, my spirit is present there with you. And I'm overjoyed to see how disciplined and deeply committed you are because you have such a solid faith in Christ, the Anointed One.

⁶ In the same way you received Jesus our Lord and Messiah by faith, continue your journey of faith, progressing further into your union with him! ⁷ Your spiritual roots go deeply into his life as you are continually infused with strength, encouraged in every way. For you are established in the faith you have absorbed and enriched by your devotion to him!

⁸ Beware that no one distracts you or intimidates you in their attempt to lead you away from Christ's fullness by pretending to be full of wisdom when they're filled with endless arguments of human logic. For they operate with humanistic and clouded judgments based on the mindset of this world system, and not the anointed truths of the Anointed One.

⁹ For he is the complete fullness of deity living in human form. ¹⁰ And our own completeness is now found in him. We are completely filled with God as Christ's fullness overflows within us. He is the Head of every kingdom and authority in the universe!

¹¹ Through our union with him we have experienced circumcision of heart. All of the guilt and power of sin has been cut away and is now extinct because of what Christ, the Anointed One, has accomplished for us.

¹² For we've been buried with him into his death. Our "baptism into death" also means we were raised with him when we believed in God's resurrection power, the power that raised him from death's realm. ¹³ This "realm of death" describes our former state, for we were held in sin's grasp. But now, we've been resurrected out of that "realm of death" never to return, for we are forever alive and forgiven of all our sins!

¹⁴ He canceled out every legal violation we had on our record and the old arrest warrant that stood to indict us. He erased it all—our sins, our stained soul—he deleted it all and they cannot be retrieved! Everything we once were in Adam has been placed onto his cross and nailed permanently there as a public display of cancellation.

¹⁵ Then Jesus made a public spectacle of all the powers and principalities of darkness, stripping away from them every weapon and all their spiritual authority and power to accuse us. And by the power of the cross, Jesus led them around as prisoners in a procession of triumph. He was not their prisoner; they were his!

¹⁶ So why would you allow anyone to judge you because of what you eat or drink, or insist that you keep the feasts, observe new moon celebrations, or the Sabbath? ¹⁷ All of these were but a prophetic shadow and the evidence of what would be fulfilled, for the body is now Christ!

¹⁸ Don't let anyone disqualify you from your prize! Don't let their pretended sincerity fool you as they deliberately lead you into their initiation of angel worship. For they take pleasure in pretending to be experts of something they know nothing about. Their reasoning is meaningless and comes only from their own opinions. ¹⁹ They refuse to take hold of the true source.

But we receive directly from him, and his life supplies vitality into every part of his body through the joining ligaments connecting us all as one. He is the divine Head who guides his body and causes it to grow by the supernatural power of God.

²⁰ For you were included in the death of Christ and have died with him to the religious system and powers of this world. Don't retreat back to being bullied by the standards and opinions of religion— ²¹ for example, their strict requirements, "You can't associate with that person!" or, "Don't eat that!" or, "You can't touch

that!"²² These are the doctrines of men and corrupt customs that are worthless to help you spiritually.²³ For though they may appear to possess the promise of wisdom in their submission to God through the deprivation of their physical bodies, it is actually nothing more than empty rules rooted in religious rituals!

The Gnostic Letter

Paul was writing this letter of instruction and encouragement from a distance. He opens the second chapter with a stated hope that his absence would not lessen the impact of his words. Paul was once again imprisoned in Rome and was forced to correspond with, rather than visit, the new churches. One has to assume Paul was acutely aware of the looming dangers facing the early church, the nastiest form being false teachings. An egregious strain of bad theology was invading the churches and was already having negative impact in other locations. This odd teaching was termed *Gnosticism*. Gnostics made up a unique mixture of belief systems that stressed salvation through "gnosis," which means "knowledge of spiritual mysteries." Gnostics taught that one's origin was to be found within a special knowledge and that God was greatly removed and uninterested in humankind. To approach God and to find salvation required accessing the unique, hidden knowledge that precious few were privy to. When this knowledge was found and applied a person would be transformed and would later transcend this life. And, believe it or not, it got worse.

Gnostics evolved in their teaching to view the physical body as inherently evil and completely unredeemable. The idea that only the spirit mattered led them to break with conventional Christian teaching on the Divinity of Jesus. The New World Dictionary states: "Christian Gnostics emphasized spiritual knowledge and experience rather than faith and the sacraments of the church as the key to unity with God." If Jesus' physical body was corrupted and thus, he was not simultaneously God and man, imagine how physically corrupted the average person is. This led to the operating principle that whatever a person did with his body was fine as only the spirit (soul) mattered to God. The basic belief was to keep your spirit healthy and do whatever you wish with your body. Gnostics never

fully explained how a person could separate their soul and body. Mine seems attached. Try as I might it all stays together.

There are too many heretical tenets of Gnosticism to list, although these three will suffice to highlight the spurious nature of this philosophy:

First, it negates the dual nature of Jesus and subsequently that of Christians. Obviously, Jesus' dual nature and that of humans are diametrically different. Jesus is defined as God Incarnate, simultaneously God and human. We are dual natured in that we are human, but we have a soul.

Second, scripture is clear on there being no unique or special knowledge required in order to approach God. Baptists call this the *Priesthood of the Believer*. We have a free and unique place before God with no restrictions of access.

Third, it does indeed matter what we do with our physical bodies. We have both a body and a soul (dual nature); only death can separate these two facets of our humanity. How we treat our bodies is important in many ways. What we do with our physical bodies is a demonstrable witness to our transformed reality in Christ.

WELCOME TO THE FAMILY

Paul segues from the perils of deceptive teachings to a reminder that God's grace has been generously bestowed upon the Gentiles. He contrasts the Hebrew practice of physical circumcision to God's symbolic setting aside of Gentile believers. The rite of circumcision signified God's covenant with his people. Jesus made this practice no longer necessary; in essence physical symbols of faith were giving way to those associated with the heart and soul (spiritual rather than physical).

Paul plainly states that God worked through Jesus to redeem Gentiles just as he did for Jews through Moses and the Hebrew Law. Paul was being opposed in Colossae by Judaizers; traditional, dogmatic Jews who followed Jesus as Messiah, but who also demanded Gentiles “become” Jewish in order to become Christian. This sect was demanding Gentile converts to submit to circumcision and to follow the various tenets of the law as a path to Jesus. Paul refuted these necessities, specifically circumcision, and drew the ire of these Jewish Christians. As Nijay K. Gupta writes:

“Paul deflates any such presumption that does not focus on Christ. Those who are ‘in Him,’ have a special kind of circumcision, performed ‘without human hands’” (93).

DON'T JUDGE ME

In 2:16-23 Paul encourages the Colossians to deflect judgmental overtures from Jews or non-Christian Gentiles. A common theme in Paul's letters was the need to filter expectations from any and all religious or cultural groups regarding prescribed behaviors. It seems virtually everyone had a list of rules to follow that would lead to success of some type. Paul is emphatic that eating or drinking this or that, and taking part in this religious festival or another, are no longer to be barometers of spiritual authenticity.

Judaism was/is, for the most part, a works-based faith. Truth be told, so are virtually all other religions with the exception of Christianity. In Christ salvation is not based on what one does or accomplishes, it is all about accepting the grace and gift of salvation into one's life. We know this but it seems we nevertheless fight against the need to achieve. We accept no-strings-attached grace, but we push back against it at the same time. Grace is both amazing and quite hard to believe simultaneously.

Even when we accept grace, we have to make peace with the reality that it matters greatly what we do with our bodies and our lives, but for reasons related

to our witness, not salvation. Living in holiness is an honor and something we do to extend the Kingdom, which sets us apart from most every religion.

Verses 20-21 emphasize this uniqueness: “Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to this world, do you submit to its rules: Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?” Paul goes on to state in verses 22-23 that all of the rules being imposed may look righteous and holy but are in reality nothing more than human reasoning. He said much the same to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 1:13-20) as they too were dealing with abstaining from food, drink and marital relations in pursuit of being holier. While these self-restraints may look holy, even righteous, they are entirely based on “human commands and teachings.” F. F. Bruce writes that believers must follow “divinely inspired” commands rather than “perishable objects of the material world, doomed to pass away by the very use that is made of them”. In short, scripture provides a template for us to use to navigate life. While it certainly isn’t exhaustive, it is wide enough for the successful pursuit of righteous living.

Paul’s final statement sums up the difficulties of restraining sensual desires. Even the strictest of purity practices will fall short in fending off sensual thoughts. Only with assistance provided by God’s wisdom and power can we overcome the immense hold of sensuality in daily life.

Takeaway:

1. There are levels and examples of bad theology that we contend with today but none quite like Gnosticism or what the Judaizers were demanding. Spiritual insight and wisdom are key to discerning bad theology when we encounter it. Bad theology is just that, bad.
2. We are unique. We are beneficiaries of grace. We could never labor our way to salvation. There is a certain level of humility to be found in this reality.

3. We do not have a rule book per se, but we do have the Holy Spirit. We can know what, when and how to live life through the Spirit.
4. There is no place for unique gnosis in the believer's life. Knowledge and wisdom are limitless and are at our request.
5. There is much to be learned and lived into through the words inspired by F.F. Bruce.

Scripture provides a template for us to use to navigate life. While it certainly isn't exhaustive, it is wide enough for the successful pursuit of righteous living, and "right-living" is our goal.

Amen & Amen

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