

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 18: Colossians & Philemon**

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Good morning! You’ve found yourself in the New Testament overview class this morning, where we are trying to step through the entire New Testament over the course of six months, tackling one or two books each week. This morning we’ll be spending most of our time on Paul’s letter to the Colossians, followed by a shorter overview of the book of Philemon. And I trust that through both we will be able to see more clearly what God has done for us in Christ, how that implies that we should and can live, and as a result, bring glory to God as we understand his word better. We’ll start with Colossians.

### Colossians: New Life in Christ

Unlike the letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote his letter to the Colossian Christians to counter a very specific heresy. It seems that some were teaching these young Christians that life and wisdom were found through the powers of our own human faculties. In chapter 2:8 we read, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

At the heart of much of this false teaching was the idea that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a great start, but there is so much more on offer. That is, Jesus is the beginning, but there are other ways to receive “fullness” in the Christian life. This was to be received by specially-revealed wisdom, perhaps with particular understanding of the Jewish law, and perhaps through angelic encounters.

This is a three-pronged attack on the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

* Judaizing and Gnostic tendencies deny the finality of Christ’s work.
* Their preoccupation with angelic experiences denies the preeminence of Christ.
* And asceticism denies our need for Christ.

In response, Paul wrote to remind them that the life of the Kingdom is found ultimately in Christ, and Christ alone. In Christ we find new life. Through Christ’s death we die to our old lives, and through his life we are given new life. Our new lives are characterized by transformed relationships with God and with others. And as a result, the life of the Kingdom is a cross-centered life.

But before we dive into to the letter itself, a little background.

1. **Background & Date**

It seems that Paul wrote and sent Ephesians and Colossians together. There is considerable overlap between the two letters, and Paul mentions Tychicus at the end of both letters as the one who likely delivered them. If you were to read the two letters back to back, you would likely get the distinct impression that Ephesians was the general letter (you’ll recall it was likely written as a circular letter to a whole group of churches in Asia Minor), while Colossians deals with many of the same themes but was addressed to the needs of one particular church. Unlike Ephesus, Paul never visited Colossae, even though it was only 100 miles east of Ephesus. Nevertheless, he had been instrumental in that church’s founding, through the conversion of Epaphras, who he then sent with the gospel to Colossae. Like the letter to the Ephesians, it appears that Paul wrote this while in prison in Rome, around 60AD. (4:3, 10, 18).

1. **Outline**

So then, what do we find in this letter? Well, not surprising given its audience of a particular church, the letter begins with a fairly lengthy introduction that focuses on Paul’s aim for this (and every) church is that we “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. Ay you strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” (1:10-13). Quite a run-on sentence, but quite an amazing picture of our objective in this Christian life.

From there, Paul steps right into the meat of his letter with one of the most amazing portraits of Christ that we find anywhere in Scripture. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (1:15) and on from there through verse 20 of chapter one. From there, Paul turns his attention to the primary implication of who Christ is for the Colossians: their reconciliation with God that you see in 1:21 through verse 23. These two truths: who Christ is, and who we are as a result, are the theological core of this book. And Paul steps back for a moment, 1:24-2:3, to consider his own work to support those great truths.

Then, beginning in 2:4 on through the end of chapter 2, we read on to see the alternative that has been placed in front of these Christians. It stems from “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to the Christ.” (verse 8). Paul pauses for a moment to remind us (beautifully) of the gospel, and then continues describing this false teaching in verse 16. It is consumed with tradition—religious festivals, new moon celebrations, Sabbath days. It delights in false humility (verse 18) and the worship of angels and a celebration of that mystical experience. It is ascetic, imposing strict rules on the body (verses 20-23). Tellingly, Paul observes, verse 23, that “These indeed have an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” A very good litmus test for evaluating different strands of teaching in our own day.

And then Paul turns, in chapter 3, to how we should live as Christians—the implications of the true gospel that do in fact result in changed lives, in real restraint of sensual indulgence. He covers how we should live together in holiness, how our families should function, and how we should behave toward others in the broader community. And then, with another round of personal greetings, Paul ends his letter with chapter four.

1. **Major Themes**

Now, with that as an overview, I’d like to turn this letter over thematically and try to parse out its primary message to us.

How exactly does Paul address the false teaching that is threatening to turn the Colossians away from Christ to the wisdom of this world? Two big things that I want you to notice.

1. First, the Christian’s new life comes from God through Christ alone.

In Christ we have received new life. Before (2:13) “you were dead in your trespasses” but now “God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.” Before (3:1-4) your minds were set on “the things that are on earth” but now your minds and hearts are set “on things that are above.” Before (2:21) we lived life as enemies of God, alienated from him, but now, we live “in a manner worthy of the Lord” (1:10). This new life changes the way we relate to God and to other people. But if we jump straight into how we should live and forget the source of that—that our new life comes from God—we will find ourselves lined up squarely with these false teachers preaching a gospel based on our own strength, derived from our own wisdom and traditions, that—in the end—is powerless against the sinfulness of our own hearts.

1. And second, the Christian’s new life is displayed in relationships with other people.

As a result of the cross, not human wisdom, Christians’ lives are changed. It may be that your mind used to be set on partying on the weekend, or expanding your portfolio, or just making sure that no one messed with you. Now think about what your priories are: loving others sacrificially, spreading the gospel, pleasing God.

Let’s look at these two main points in more detail.

**A. From God**

First, our new life is a gift from God. Paul thanks God for the Colossians’ faith, knowing that God is the author of it (1:3). He prays: “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (1:12-14) In his prayer he acknowledges that God rescues, strengthens, qualifies, and redeems us.

Let’s note two things about God’s gift of new life to us. First, God gives us this new life through Christ. “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” Paul writes (2:9). “And you, who were dead in your trespasses . . . God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.” (2:13) Christ is the source of our life and his death and resurrection is the means by which God applies that life to us. Paul writes “For you have died, and *your life is hidden* with Christ in God. When Christ *who is your life* appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” (3:3-4) This is what baptism symbolizes, and why baptism is the public sign of our profession of faith. Paul writes, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” (2:11-12) Incidentally, Colossians is one of the clearest places in the New Testament where we understand what baptism means. Often, people have suggested that baptism is a continuation of the covenant of circumcision in the Old Testament—and thus should be applied to our children even before they are saved. And sure enough, in 2:11-12, Paul does indeed parallel baptism with circumcision. But he takes pains to show that the circumcision he is referring to is not physical circumcision “done by the hands of men” but circumcision of the heart. And just as circumcision of the heart was a reference to faith in the Old Testament, so baptism today is only for those who have experienced that same faith.

Second, if God gives us this new life *through Christ*, we should also note that God gives us this new life through Christ *alone*. No other person, achievement, idea, or human effort will avail us. And this idea of salvation through Christ alone is critical as Paul defends the gospel from these false teachers. Paul calls Christ “God’s mystery . . . in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (2:2-3). To that end Paul warns the Colossians not to be deceived or taken captive “with plausible arguments.” (2:4), “philosophy and empty deceit,” “human tradition,” or the “elemental spirit of the world,” (2:8). The Colossians evidently were being led astray by relying on ritual, asceticism, angel worship, and fashionable philosophy. “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath . . . Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,” (2:16, 18). These are serious temptations. As I read earlier, Paul acknowledges that “such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body,” but ultimately “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.” (2:22-23).

Beware of Christianity *plus* something else. Christianity—with a dash of Buddhism. Christianity and a daily regime of meditation and exercise. Christianity modernized with New Age sensibility. Christianity made intellectually respectable with Plato or Aristotle. Christianity made easy with a fixed calendar of prayers and recitations and scented candles. There are a lot of formulas for how to augment the Bible with something else. Lots of Christians feel the pull to mix their faith with something else, whether it is philosophy, asceticism, other religions, or elaborate ceremonies and rituals. The problem is that the something else ends up becoming more important and conflicting with fundamental truths of Scripture. The book of Colossians is a good place to go to reflect on the sufficiency and supremacy of God’s work in Christ—and the resulting simplicity of the Christian faith.

There isn’t anything wrong with simply studying other world religions or philosophy. Such study can help us become better evangelists and apologists for the faith. And there is nothing wrong with participating in shared corporate worship—that will over time, develop its own habits and characteristics. But these things should never become substitutes for Christ, or even necessary additions to Christ. We can change our rituals and still worship God. We can go our entire Christians lives without an angelic encounter or even a dramatic spiritual “experience” and still be faithful. We can become perfectly knowledgeable about the faith without studying the philosophers’ commentaries on it. Paul strongly cautions the Colossians always to remember that Christ *alone* is fully sufficient to bring us to “fullness” and to give us “new life.” In fact Paul gives one of the strongest statements of Christ’s supremacy and sufficiency in all Scripture in 1:15-20:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities –All things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

Nothing can compare with Christ!

**B. For God and Others**

That was the first thing I wanted you to notice: our new life comes *from* God *through* Christ alone. And the second: this new life is lived *for* God’s glory and according to his purposes. God is not only the source of our new life: God’s character is the model for our new life and His will is a guide for our new life.

As I mentioned earlier, Paul prays that the Christians in Colossae would live “so as to walk in a manner worthy of the lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” (1:10-12). Our lives are to be worthy of God and pleasing to him, which means that our lives should be marked by increasing knowledge about God, thankfulness for all that he has given us, and patience with the trials and temptations of this life. Paul reiterates this theme in 2:6, where he writes that the truth of the gospel “which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing –as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.”

Paul tells the Colossians that their new life in Christ should have real implications for how they live their lives and how they treat each other. Because “you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” (3:9-10) he expects them to “put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices” (3:8-9). In their new life, they are to live differently. “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (3:12-14) Our new life starts with a new heart, with new attitudes, with a new approach and a new way of thinking about and responding to the world.

Practically speaking, this new way of living shows itself in our relationships with other people. In chapter 3 Paul gives guidance to different groups of people in their key relationships, focusing on the family. “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.” (3:18-21). Our new life in Christ should be evident first in how we treat our family members. This can be especially challenging because our family members are precisely the people we often take for granted. It can be tempting to treat one’s home as the place where we no longer have to be polite or kind, where we are allowed to “relax,”—in other words, let’s be honest, to be selfish with our words and our time. But Paul is very specific: the home is where we begin to live our new lives. Note that while the roles differ—wife, husband, children—the theme is the same: love.

We also live our new lives in the workplace. Paul gives guidance to “bondservants” which parallels loosely with our concept of “servants,” and to “masters.” “Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.” (3:22-24). Now modern employees in this country typically have far more rights and privileges in the workplace than ancient servants did in theirs. Yet Paul was telling servants in the ancient world to “obey” with “sincerity of heart,” and to “work heartily.” If they, with far fewer rewards, were to work with sincerity and hard effort, how much more should we? This can be difficult, because complaining about our jobs is pretty much the entire content of our small talk at parties and lunches here in Washington, D.C. Yet Paul reminds us that we should be grateful to work and should be careful to honor God with or labor. We should eagerly seek to please our employers, genuinely from the heart. We shouldn’t do just enough to get by, or only perform when the boss is watching. I think Paul is saying that we should take pride in our work, even enjoy it! Finally, Paul adds a word for employers. “Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”

So our new life should show itself in our relationships with our family, in the workplace, and in all of our interactions generally. As Paul is winding down his short letter to the Colossians, he counsels them to “Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” (4:5-6) This new life should simply be a way of life evident in everything we do, in all that we say, to every person we meet and with whom we interact.

Because our new life is so important and so all-encompassing, we must strive to endure to the end. “He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.” (1:22-23). We must persevere to the end to receive the fullness of our new lives with him in the new creation. That is why Paul prays that the Colossians would have “all endurance and patience with joy,” (1:11). We know that our perseverance is guaranteed by God who enables us to live through his Spirit, yet we also see here in Colossians that we must strive every day to live out this perseverance.

And all of this, if we understand it correctly, is *impossible* if we don’t understand the Christ and the gospel laid out in the first half of the letter. So as you study this book, spend good time considering and meditating on Paul’s words in the first chapter. Consider this God-centered, God-powered, God-glorifying gospel that we have received, and then—only then—read on and contemplate how it should evidence itself in your life.

**C. Conclusion**

Paul’s letter to the Colossians teaches us that in Christ we have received new life. We are dead to our sins and made alive through him. And Christ alone is sufficient for our new lives. He is the “image of the invisible God” in whom the fullness of God dwells. Compared to the absolute supremacy of Christ, nothing else compares. Sophisticated philosophy, angelic encounters, beautiful rituals, ancient traditions, supposedly secret knowledge, New Age spiritualism, and anything else simply pales in comparison to Christ the King.

And our new lives bring new relationships. We relate in a fundamentally new way to God. We have peace with him, seek to grow in knowledge of him, and obey his will for our lives. We relate in a new way as well to our families, friends, colleagues, and co-workers. We are no longer marked by “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness” but by “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” And we are called to persevere in this new life to the end—with God’s help through his Spirit. That is the message of Colossians. Which brings us to Philemon.

## Philemon Reconciliation [10:20]

Philemon is the shortest of Paul’s letters. It is also unique in that it is not a letter to a church, but to an individual church member. It’s a personal letter from Paul on behalf of Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus who served alongside Paul (we assume Onesimus became a Christian after he ran away). Paul's compassion and love for the young man is apparent when he calls him "my child." He has sent him back to ask for forgiveness.

Before we go further, let me say a word about slavery in the NT. To begin with, we want to be careful not to read 18th and 19th century race-based chattel slavery back into the 1st century. In Paul’s day, though some slavery was the result of warfare, most was of an economic kind more akin to indentured servanthood. Rome was full of doctors, lawyers and teachers who were slaves And it was not based on race. That said, the New Testament never excuses slavery, nor exonerates slave holders. It does not try to set up an alternative political-economic system. Rather, as Paul does here, it seeks to bring the implications of the gospel to bear on both slave and master.

###### Outline

1. Paul's Greeting (1-3)
2. Thanksgiving and intercession for Philemon (4-7)
3. Paul's plea for Onesimus (8-22)
4. Final remarks (23-25)

###### Major Themes and Message

The theme of reconciliation through the power of Christ, the cross-centered life, runs throughout the book of Colossians (written to the church attended by the recipients of this note). **Reconciliation** is put into practice in the book of Philemon, in a very real way. Paul is asking one man to forgive another who has wronged him directly. Both are asked to do something difficult.

*Onesimus is a picture of someone who needs forgiveness.* Paul has sent Onesimus back to his employer whom he had wronged. *Now Onesimus would turn up at Philemon’s house with nothing but a letter from Paul in his hand. Can you imagine the former slave standing in the doorway as his former employer opens the door—needing forgiveness, helpless to repay, cared for only by someone far away in prison. In one sense, the destitution of this former slave is incomparable. He can offer nothing, and he deserves punishment.*

Philemon, for his part, may not have found it easy to forgive. *By forgiving Onesimus, he might be regarded as showing weakness. He might bring shame upon himself among his neighbors for treating a runaway employee, or indentured servant, this way. Perhaps he worries that such leniency would encourage Onesimus to view his crime lightly. Perhaps it would also encourage others to follow Onesimus’s example and let them think they too would get off lightly.* Any of you who have exercised authority in the workplace know the tension between justice and mercy towards your employees.

Why does Paul make this request? So that the love of Christ and the reconciling, redeeming power of the gospel, might be displayed. Paul is a peacemaker, and he is pushy about it! Note how Paul goes about pleading with Philemon. Onesimus had become a Christian, and so Paul identifies himself closely with Onesimus. Onesimus is “my child,” (10) and “my very heart,” (12) and “beloved brother –especially to me,” (16). He even says “receive him as you would receive me.” (17) and offers to pay Onesimus’ debts (18). Paul enters into Onesimus’ world and identifies closely with him and his trials. From within that position Paul pleads with Philemon not for Onesimus’ sake, but for his own. What a picture of what Christ has done for us! When we join ourselves to him, he identifies with us and pleads with the Father on our behalf. Paul is simply following Christ’s example in seeking reconciliation between two believers.

Paul’s use of the situation offers a model and an example of pastoral ministering, counseling, and forgiveness. When confronting someone, appeal to the love that they have known in Christ. Have confidence that if you are speaking to a Christian then the Lord will work love in them. We don’t need to manipulate one another. Just as in Colossians, we can hold out the gospel to one another, trusting that it is the only sufficient grounds for transformation.

And Onesimus, for his part, is in the situation we are all in before God. We can offer nothing to God. We deserve punishment. And we are desperately in need of his forgiveness. We can only imagine how Onesimus must have felt when Paul told him he had to return to Philemon, or what it was like to carry that letter back to his employer. Do you remember what it was like the first time you realized the depth of your sin and the justice of God’s wrath against you? Paul’s little letter offers a good opportunity to meditate on that and call it to mind again. *We need God’s condescending, self-lowering love in our own lives, offered to us only because Christ has met the demands of justice for all who repent and believe. We need to be forgiven, and we need to forgive, if we would have true Christian faith.*

###### Conclusion

What then is the life of the Kingdom? It is a life that from first to last is marked by the grace that we have been shown in and through Christ. A grace that unites us, a grace that animates us, a grace that has changed us, so that we might indeed be a display of the glory of God, and Jesus words might be fulfilled, that all men would know that we are his disciples, because of our love for one another.