

Have you ever felt like a second-class Christian because you don't do certain things?

Because there are certain religious exercises that you don't practice as much as others or maybe you don't practice at all?

For example maybe you don't fast, or tithe, or pray a certain amount of time each day?

I'm certainly not suggesting these practices are wrong but I am suggesting that when they become the standards by which we or others judge whether or not we are Christians or even good Christians, something is wrong.

Or have you felt like a second-class Christian because you do certain things?

You smoke or drink wine or other alcoholic beverages or have a television.

I'm certainly not suggesting these practices are particularly helpful but I am suggesting that when they become the standards by which we or others judge whether or not we are Christians or even good Christians, something is wrong.

Have you ever been given the impression that to be a good Christian you had to be like someone else you know?

Or have you ever been exposed to the "secret" of the spirit filled life, or the "key" to victorious living, or the "way" to the successful Christian life?

- And because it didn't happen to you, you were left feeling and wondering if you were missing out?

Has it possibly been even worse than that for you?

Because you didn't measure up to someone else's standards, you began to wonder if you were a Christian at all? - Wondering if maybe you had to do something more to truly be a Christian?

Because we know ourselves so well with all our sins and failings, because we struggle with things not being as they should be in our lives, by our own standards, let alone everyone else's, we are easy victims for those who would come along telling us they have the "secret" to the Christian life.

Others of us become easy targets for false ideas about Christianity because of our desire to overcome all of life's difficulties - being told that if we would believe correctly, or exercise some spiritual technique, we would get well or overcome some other problem.

Or others of us wanting to be successful in life are easy targets for the positive mental attitude teaching that mixes Norman Vincent Peale and Napoleon Hill with Jesus - a technique to achieve spiritual and material benefits.

The Lord Jesus has such a love for his people, for us, that he writes by the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul to the Colossian Christians to warn them and us of the dangers of such thinking.

Apparently the Christians in Colosse, a city in what is now the country of Turkey, were subject to some of the same temptations, some of the same faulty thinking as we are.

We will be looking mostly at chapter 2 today but to prepare for it I want you to think with me about what Paul has already written to these Christians in chapter 1:

In the first 14 verses of the chapter, as I suggested two weeks ago, Paul encourages these believers by writing of their good growth in Christianity and by praying for them.

He ends that section in verses 14-15 by reminding them of the central truth of the Gospel:

God has rescued them, and us, from the control of darkness and brought them into the kingdom of Jesus, the Son he loves, in whom they have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

In other words, this new life that God has given them, and us, is focused on and centered in Jesus, Jesus the person. Not abstract theological philosophy but in a person - Jesus.

From the outset, Paul makes it clear that Jesus is the subject of Paul's letter.

In verses 15-20, some of which we looked at last week, Paul presents Jesus as the creator, sustainer and ruler of everything that has ever been made. Jesus is Lord.

But not only is he Lord, he is also Savior.

Look at verse 21 and following:

Remember, once you were God's enemies but now God has brought you back into right relationship with himself.

How? Through Christ's death on your behalf.

verse 23 indicates that it was your faith in Jesus and the good news about Him, the gospel - what he did for you - that has brought you into a relationship with Him.

So that in verse 27 Paul could say it is "Christ in you".

And in verses 28 & 29 Paul writes, that he labors to bring every believer to perfection, to maturity, to full relationship with Christ.

Look also at the first three verses of chapter Two where Paul continues that theme:

He writes that he is struggling for them - he is deeply concerned for them, praying and writing and whatever else he can do to help them.

Because he wants them to know God in Christ, because in Jesus is all the wisdom and knowledge of God.

Now in case you have missed it in the midst of all my words:

Paul wants these Christians and us to know Jesus.

Paul is convinced that Jesus is God and thus to know Jesus is to know God.

He isn't asking them to adopt a particular religion or a certain set of religious practices but he is asking them to relate to Jesus - to know him.

It isn't until verse 4 that we get our first hint of the trouble that is looming over this church, the false teaching that is facing this group of believers. READ 4

I think they would have immediately known what Paul was writing about but we must look on to verse 8 for clues:

The "fine-sounding arguments" of verse 4 were apparently empty and deceptive philosophies dependent on human traditions or man-made rules.

Note the end of verse 8, the biggest problem is that these philosophies, these religious ideas didn't depend on a relationship to Christ. They didn't focus on Christ but distracted the believer to focus on other things by which to judge their relationship to God.

Look on to verses 16-17 briefly, these false teachers were leading the Christians in Colosse to judge their relationship to God by whether they did or did not do certain religious things - but it was distracting them from focusing on what is real - Christ.

Look on to verses 18-19, these believers were being taught religious practices that would lead them away from Christ, the Head of the church.

All in all you get the impression that these Christians were being tempted with ideas that sounded religious enough but focused their attention and faith on techniques rules, and practices rather than on Jesus.

In our own setting, I think the counterparts would be those of us who begin to judge our Christianity or others' Christianity by the things we do or do not do.

We think God must be pleased with us because we go to church, pray a little, give a little, and do a little, while our relationship to Jesus may be deader than a doornail.

Conversely, there are some who labor under heavy loads of guilt and defeat because they are comparing themselves to others rather than relating to Jesus and seeking to love and please him.

So the problem was that people were tending to reduce Christianity to a set of rules rather than a relationship with Jesus.

Paul's answer to it is given in verses 6 & 7! READ

You don't need some new spiritual technique.

You don't need some new "key" or "secret" to spiritual life.

You certainly don't need some ever-changing, man-made set of "do's" and "don'ts" to be acceptable to God.

What you need is to believe in the Jesus you have already been taught and to continue to live in an active, conversing, listening, growing relationship to Him.

After all! vs 9-10 - "in Christ all the deity dwells in bodily form".

To know Jesus is to know God. There is no one or anything else that can lead you to God - He is God

And through knowing him you have been given fullness, you can become all God created you to be - a completed human being

But notice it is all "in Christ" - through knowing Him, relating to him day by day.

In verses 11-15 then, Paul spells out some of what Jesus has already done for them - how Jesus has freed them from three different things that allows them now to know Jesus and live each day in relationship with Him.

First of all, in verses 11 and 12, Paul writes that Jesus has freed you from your old nature - you can now change and grow to be like Jesus.

The Bible teaches that every part of our human nature, our thinking, our wills, our feelings, every part of us is affected by sin - a stance of rebellion against God.

Though we are not as bad as we could be, we nonetheless are held captive by our sinful desires and cannot please God.

We are self-centered in our orientation - and all the good deeds we might try won't change that. It is our nature.

Apparently there were people in the church at Colosse just as there are people in churches today who think they can control that old nature - that old propensity to sin - people who think they can control it by just putting enough rules up.

It is true that if the law is enforced strictly enough we can get a certain compliance - the "flesh" - the "old nature" can be harnessed for a time.

We see it with students all the time - you can get compliance but not change. You can get control but not transformation.

Legalistic rules won't bring about the kind of change that is truly possible.

In verses 11 & 12 Paul uses two symbols to explain what Christ did for us in regards to our nature.

First of all he uses the symbol of "circumcision".

At God's instruction, God's people in the Old Testament, used a surgical procedure on their male babies to symbolize their relationship to God.

Literally part of their flesh was cut off to indicate their uniqueness in relationship to God.

But even in the Old Testament we learn that the surgical act itself didn't produce that new relationship to God - it only symbolized the needed "circumcision" of the heart - a cutting off of the old flesh, the old nature - and the granting of a new nature, by God, that would want to follow God and love him.

And so here in Colossians 2, Paul says I am not talking about a circumcision done with hands - the literal circumcision of babies - but I'm talking about the change of your natures brought about by Jesus Christ.

And when did that change take place?

vs 12 - When you by faith died with Jesus and were resurrected with Him.

Here then, in v 12, is the second symbol Paul uses: Baptism.

We know that Baptism in both the Old Testament times and in the New Testament times indicated a change in direction in ones life - it meant a new allegiance -

People would be baptized into the Jewish religion.

People would be baptized into other beliefs and religions.

And when they became Christians they were baptized in water indicating their death to the former way of life and a resurrection to a whole new life - a life in Christ.

While they were literally baptized in water, for Christians that was a symbol of a far more important spiritual experience:

When Jesus died on the cross he died for us - or in other words we were in him on that cross. Our old sinful natures died that day, in him.

And being lowered into the waters of baptism symbolizes that death of our old self-centered natures in Christ's death.

And likewise, being raised out of the waters of baptism symbolizes our resurrection with a new life - A Christ-given spiritual life now in us.

I think the point of verses 11 & 12 is that in Christ we have been freed from that old self-centered nature -

It no longer controls every part of our thinking, willing, and feeling - By God's grace working in our new life, we can change and become more like Jesus.

Now it is possible for transformation not just control or compliance - we have been given a new nature - one that desires to be like Christ.

In verses 13 & 14 Paul tells us the second thing from which Christ freed us.

He has freed us from the guilt and penalty of the law.

The picture here is one of the Law of God standing as evidence against us.

We have sinned, we have broken the laws of God.

Like the strokes or points that you don't want in a golf game these points, these sins, these violations of God's law, were stacked up against us - they were written down as evidence against us.

And when Jesus died on the cross, in our place, he "canceled" that debt, he wiped clean that slate of sins, he nailed that evidence to the cross, he took it away.

No longer would God's people be condemned because of their violations of the law -

God's relationship to them would not be on the basis of laws kept or broken but on the basis of a relationship with his Son - Jesus.

Our relationship to God is not based on keeping laws regardless of how good and biblical those laws may be. Jesus has freed us from that.

Our relationship to God has changed from slavery to adoption.

Slaves keep the law in order to be acceptable.

Sons and daughters obey their father because they are acceptable, loved.

Obedience flows from love and transformed hearts not just from requirements and compliance.

The third thing Jesus has freed us from is the power or control of evil spirits.

Those Colossian Christians were being led by some to believe they had to worship angels and placate the demons.

There are too many even in churches today who read the astrologers charts, are afraid to tempt fate, who live in some fear that their lives are being crossed by spirits or at least forces beyond their control.

In verse 15 Paul makes clear that when Jesus died and rose again he conquered every personal or impersonal force existing in all creation.

What I'd like to read for you next is different prose, but I love the way F.F. Bruce says it: "The very cross of disgrace and death by which the hostile forces thought they had Jesus in their grasp and had conquered him forever was turned by him into the instrument of their defeat and captivity.

As he was suspended there, bound hand and foot to the wood in apparent weakness, they imagined they had him at their mercy, and flung themselves upon him with hostile intent.

But far from suffering their assault without resistance, he grappled with them and mastered them, stripping them of all the armor in which they trusted, and held them aloft in his mighty, outstretched hands, displaying to the universe their helplessness and his own unvanquished strength...

They were dethroned and disabled and the shameful tree has become the victor's triumphal chariot before which his captives are driven in humiliating procession, the involuntary and impotent confessors of their overcomers superiority." (p139-40 NICNT)

As we saw last week God's people are under no obligation whatever to fear the forces of evil be they personal or impersonal.

To do anything that smacks of appeasing or responding to the unseen forces of the universe is not only foolish but is a denial of the power of our risen Lord.

Be done with astrology, flirting with the demonic, playing with unseen forces.

They have no place in your life - you are in Christ.

And so we come to verse 16:

Because of what Christ has done, because he has set you free DON'T let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink or celebrate or observe as a religious practice - That's not the issue!

Someone here may hear this, this morning, and say, "Yes, that's what I believe. Live and let live. Don't judge that you may not be judged. No one should try to tell me how to live - that's my business. I am free to do whatever I choose.

Again I would say - That's not the issue!

THE ISSUE IS JESUS!!

It is not am I free to do whatever I want but am I free to know Him and follow Him and please Him.

In conclusion go with me back to verses 6 & 7. READ again

You received Jesus Christ by faith in Him - it was the beginning of a relationship. Just as it started by faith, by connecting to Him, and not by keeping rules or laws SO continue to relate to him - by faith in Him.

Don't let others rob you of your relationship to him by turning your head to ritual or rules. Don't let rules or a form of religious conformity become substitutes for knowing him.

I want you to know HIM!

I don't want you just to come to church, I want you to celebrate your relationship with Jesus.

I don't want you to just teach Sunday School or lead a growth group or sing in the choir, I want you to tell people about Jesus.

I don't want you to have devotions or quiet-time, I want you to meet with and talk with Jesus.

That is not legalism, that is a relationship.