

Paul's First Warning

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[0:00] Last week when we covered the first seven verses of Colossians chapter 2, we saw Paul give a reminder to the readers of his letter in verses 6 and 7.

These verses say, Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed and overflowing with gratitude.

So we have been firmly rooted in Christ, and we are now being built up in him. By taking in the truth of the word, believers get a strong mind, and by living out these truths, they receive full assurance that Christ is who he claimed to be.

Assured of that, then, believers can appropriate the riches that are his legacy to believers and walk in him, and as they walk in him, they will grow in him and become established in their faith, and as a result, they'll give praise and thanksgiving to God.

The remainder of chapter 2 has three specific warnings. We'll take a couple of weeks at least to look at these warnings, but in 2.8, Paul writes, See to it that no one takes you captive.

[1:36] In 2.16, he writes, Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you. And then in 2.18, Paul writes, Let no one disqualify you. Tonight, we're going to look at the warning that runs from 2.8 to 15.

And as we read these verses, listen to how many times you hear the phrases, In him and with him. In all of those cases, the him, of course, is Christ.

So let's go ahead and read 2.8 through 15 in Colossians. They say, 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.

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, By canceling the record of death that stood against us with its legal demands.

This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame By triumphing over them in him. So although we have been firmly rooted in Christ and are now being built up in him, Some things can hinder our progress.

[3:20] We've talked about how this letter was written to address heresies facing the Colossians. The three warnings that we will study in chapter 2 give us some clues about what the heresies may be.

Through his warnings, Paul gives a model for dealing with heresy. You'll notice that he does not bitterly denounce the heresy by name. He doesn't even give it a name. And he doesn't even present in exhaustive detail what the heretics believe.

He deals with that heresy by emphasizing those truths that refute its claims And similar claims by all other heresies, no matter what their names. And when you do that, any false system will collapse in the face of the truth.

We'll break verses 8 through 15 into three sections. The first one being verses 8 to 10. And in verses 8 to 10, we'll see the fiction contrasted with the facts.

So the fiction contrasted with the facts is what we'll look at in these verses. Here are verses 8 to 10 again. They say, To hear this warning means to wake up to the fact that there's real danger for Christian believers.

[5:05] The shock will be to realize that there are kidnappers around us with the means to take us captive. When you think about it, though, it makes sense. Because the false teachers didn't go out and win the loss no more than cultists do today.

They kidnapped converts from other churches. Most of the people who are members of anti-Christian cults were at one time or another associated with the Christian church of one denomination or another.

The remainder of verse 8 describes how the false teachers try to take people captive. Paul says that the false teachers used philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

And the last phrase could be more accurately translated as the philosophy and empty deceit. So Paul clearly is referring to one specific example of philosophical thought that was a threat to the faith of the Colossians in the first century.

However, Christians do need to be cautious about any form of philosophy that's not according to Christ. If it's in any way contrary to the revelation of God in Christ or diminishes from His supremacy and glory, that philosophy is to be shunned.

[6:21] Philosophy that is not according to Christ, whatever it is, is empty deceit. It lacks content of any value. It's without truth. It has no firm basis.

And it has no power for good. The philosophy that Paul condemns here is according to human tradition. So we know it's earthly in origin. In other words, this is a philosophy that was conceived in the mind of man and didn't come by means of divine revelation.

It may well be compatible with and confirm human traditions, but it has nothing in it that's of God. Just because people have believed something and handed it down through the years doesn't make it true.

Tradition usually serves merely to perpetuate error. And if you study the history of philosophy, you see an illustration of that point. Most philosophers have built on the work of previous philosophers either to refine their system or to refute their system.

First century Judaism is another example of the effects of tradition. The Jewish believers and teachers had encrusted the Word of God with so many customs, rituals, and teachings that they were no longer able to distinguish it from the traditions of men.

[7:34] Jesus and the Pharisees had a discussion about tradition versus custom in Mark 7, 1-13. This cross-reference is lengthy, but it shows how the Jews no longer could separate tradition from God's Word.

So if you want to flip over to Mark 7, 1-13, we'll go ahead and look at these verses for a cross-reference here. Starting in verse 1 of Mark 7, it says, Now when the Pharisees had gathered to him with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash.

And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches. And the Pharisees and the scribes ask him, Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?

And he said to them, Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites? As it is written, This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

[8:51] In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. And he said to them, You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition.

For Moses said, Honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. But you say, If a man tells his father or his mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is corban, that is, given to God, then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.

And many such things you do. So you can see how strongly Jesus condemns tradition there that's not according to God in these verses. The Jews weren't the only ones, though, who had their traditions.

The Gentiles did, too. The same word translated as tradition here in Colossians 2.8 was translated as ways inherited from your father in 1 Peter 1.18.

Here's what Peter said in 1 Peter 1.18 and 19. Peter said, Another source of empty philosophy was According to the elemental spirits of the world.

[10:25] Some translations render this phrase the elementary principles of the world. Conservative scholars actually have two different ways of looking at this ambiguous phrase.

You can tell which each translation favors by looking at whether the translations put principles or spirit in their verse. Either way, Paul's point is clear.

Relying on either principles or spirits instead of Christ is futile. The reason that some people favor principles as the translation is that the Greek word most often primarily refers to the letters of the alphabet.

It literally means things in a row. In this scenario, Paul might be describing the false belief system of the Colossian heretics as too simple for mature spiritual adults.

To accept their teaching would be to descend or to regress from the mature teaching of Scripture to the infantile teachings of an immature religion based not on advanced thinking, but on silly and childish thoughts.

[11:29] Paul's point in that case would be that to abandon biblical truth for empty philosophy is like returning to kindergarten after you've earned your doctorate. The same phrase also is found in Galatians 4.3 and here's what Paul said in Galatians 4.3-5.

In the same way, we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons. But if Paul was referring to elementary spirits here instead of elemental principles, it could be that those spirits were supposed emanations from God or spirit beings that the people of the ancient world associated with stars and planets.

And this would be another way of referring to those spiritual beings which Christ created and over which he exercises sovereign rule. And it could also refer to the demonic spirits that Paul will soon declare as defeated by means of the cross.

So you can see that either way, regardless of how we interpret this phrase, relying on anything but Christ doesn't make sense at all.

[12:48] We know that there's demonic energy behind any philosophy that undermines or detracts or even tries to supplement the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he and he alone is truly enough.

He's all that Christians will ever need. And that's something we need to keep in mind as we continue to go through this book. The fact that Jesus alone is enough is Paul's point in Colossians 2, 9 and 10.

Paul wrote there, For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him who is the head of all rule and authority. The opening word of verse 9 connects the whole passage together to the warning in verse 8.

And Paul supports the seriousness of his warning in 2, 8 by pointing to Christ and the truth about him. We've seen the word fullness before. We saw it back in Colossians 1, 19.

It means the sum total of all that God is, so all of his being and his attributes. Back in Colossians 1, 19, Paul told us, For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

[13:57] Colossians 2, 9 is perhaps the most definitive statement of Christ's deity in all of the epistles. Remember, it was the Jewish Paul who was writing to these Gentile Colossians.

He didn't allow any notion that Jesus was a divine figure or something about divinity was present in him. Certainly not that he was one among many religious figures.

He was saying that he is the divine figure, all the fullness of deity. It means that there's no more of deity to be found anywhere else. So that's a big difference in seeing Jesus as just a divine figure or the divine figure.

The Colossian false teachers apparently taught that spirit was good and matter was evil. It was unthinkable to them then that God would take on a human body.

And Paul counters that false doctrine by emphasizing that all the fullness of deity dwells in Christ in bodily form. The one who took it upon himself human nature at Bethlehem will keep all that humanity for eternity.

[14:59] He'll forever be the God-man. Then in verse 10, Paul goes on to tell us that all believers are filled in Christ. Paul didn't mean that the Colossian Christians were elevated to the same stature as Jesus, nor did he mean that any one Christian could become deity.

Paul picked up the term to state that just as Jesus was fully God, believers are fully complete in Christ. Nothing lacks in our salvation. Even though our understanding of salvation may grow and

the appropriation of its blessings may increase, we already have all the salvation we need, whether or not we realize it.

In Christ, we have all there is, so we have the fullness of salvation. At salvation, believers become partakers of the divine nature.

That, of course, is from 2 Peter 1.4. And then we're made complete. Believers are spiritually complete because they have fellowship with God. They're morally complete because they recognize the authority of God's will.

And they're mentally complete because they know the truth about the ultimate reality. So Paul's brief statement about believers being filled in Christ is enough for us to see why we must take care to avoid being taken in by any ideas that would move us away from Christ or on from Christ, no matter how persuasive or impressive they may be.

[16 : 28] Because if you move away from Christ, no matter what you're promised, be very clear about the result. Paul is telling us that we'll lose in that case.

Verse 10 ends by reminding us that Christ is the head of all rule and authority. Paul's picking up a major theme from his introduction here, especially verse 16 of chapter 1, where he also mentioned rulers and authorities.

There's no power or authority that can rival Christ. And we'll see more about that when we get to verse 15. But we already must see that there's no power, no authority that's independent of Christ or that is not under Christ.

No human philosophy whatsoever, no human tradition, no human values or human insight that is not according to Christ can begin to compare to him.

So there are delusions and empty deceits. And that again is why we must not be taken captive by any such thing. So we've seen the fiction contrasted with the facts.

[17 : 34] Verses 11 and 12 have the second section of this passage. And in those verses we see the flesh contrasted with the faith. So we see the flesh contrasted with the faith.

Listen to verses 11 and 12 again. Paul wrote, This section gives us an indication that some people were teaching that Christ plus rituals were necessary for salvation.

Paul directly refutes these claims. From the beginning, circumcision was used symbolically to illustrate the desperate need man had for cleansing of the heart.

In Deuteronomy 10.16, Moses commanded the people of Israel saying, Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart and be no longer stubborn. Deuteronomy 10 adds, The Lord commanded the Israelites of Jeremiah's time to circumcise themselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of their hearts.

So God was always concerned with the heart, not with a physical rite. The New Testament also emphasizes circumcising the heart. Stephen accused the Sanhedrin of being stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears.

[19 : 21] And Paul defined true circumcision in Romans 2.29 as, A Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is the matter of the heart, by the spirit, not by the letter.

In Colossians 2.11, the body of the flesh refers to the sinful fallen human nature that's totally dominating believers before their salvation.

Christians have been cleansed of that sinful dominance and have been given a new nature created in righteousness, having been circumcised with the circumcision made without hands. That is, one that's not physical, but is spiritual instead.

Philippians 3.3 says, For we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

Moving on to Colossians 2.12, we see reference to another rite, baptism. And spiritual baptism is in view here.

[20 : 21] And when viewed as a rite necessary for salvation, baptism is as unnecessary as circumcision. Paul would hardly replace one rite with another.

So arguing that the change from spiritual death to spiritual life is achieved by water baptism would make Paul as much as a ritualist as those he was condemning. So water baptism is no more in view in 2.12 than physical circumcision was in 2.11.

Both verses actually speak of spiritual realities. Of course, we know that baptism pictures believers' union with Christ. That spiritual union of the believer with Christ takes place at salvation.

Baptism is only a symbol of that union that's already happened. In Christ, believers have shared in his death fully and completely. They've been buried with him.

And to be joined with Christ in his death cannot stop with the burial because Christ was raised with the tomb. And he was raised from the tomb. And the one who raised him from the dead is the one who has also raised us to new life in him.

[21 : 28] So you have this new life in your union with him whom God has raised. And the union is accomplished through faith. And that faith is faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead.

Faith in Christ is, at the same time, faith in God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So united to him by faith, we share in his resurrection life.

And this faith is a sure sign of new life, just as it's the means of taking hold of that new life. So let's pause for a minute on Paul's statement about faith and the powerful working of God.

The word translated powerful working is the same Greek word used earlier by Paul in Colossians 1.29, where he described himself as struggling with all of God's energy to accomplish the ministry that he had been given.

Saving faith entails confidence that God and God alone is able and is powerful enough to deliver us from spiritual death and the guilt of sin. This is inseparable from faith in Christ as the one by whom his death and resurrection made it all possible.

[22 : 38] But here in Colossians 2.12, Paul wanted to highlight the importance of faith in God's power. It's important for us to know and trust in the omnipotence of God, the limitless energy of his divine will, to do for us what we're helpless and hopeless to do for ourselves.

Paul will expand on God's power in the final section of our lesson, so we'll go ahead and move on to that section now. We've seen the fiction contrasted with the facts and the flesh contrasted with the faith.

In the last three verses of this section, we see the forgiven contrasted with the failures. So the forgiven contrasted with the failures is what we'll look at next.

We see those both in verses 13 through 15. Paul wrote, So Paul describes two glorious elements. in our salvation in Colossians 2.13 and 14. Being made spiritually alive and having our sins forgiven. Before these concepts can mean anything to us, though, he first portrays our condition before and apart from Christ.

[24 : 14] He says we were dead in our trespasses. And then he says we were in debt to God infinitely beyond our capacity to pay. Listen to this quote from John Stott.

John Stott said,

So we should not hesitate to affirm that a life without God, however physically fit and mentally alert the person may be, is a living death, and that those who are livid are dead even while they are living.

So that's really what we need to understand here. All people are born dead and remain dead until such time as God sovereignly infuses life and brings them by his spirit to faith in Jesus Christ.

That reality is part of the reason why Paul referred to faith in the powerful working of God in our last section. Verse 13 tells us that God has forgiven us all of our trespasses.

[26 : 09] And verse 14 says that God did that by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. So God himself paid the debt when his son died on the cross.

God upheld the holiness of his own law when Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin. God not only erased the document, but he took it away by nailing it to the cross.

When Jesus died, the condemning document was destroyed. So we are fully forgiven. And destroyed is a good description of what happened to the record of our sins when God nailed it to the cross.

The Greek word there is strong. It means obliterated. So the record of the debt no longer exists. The slate's been wiped clean. The record has been completely expunged.

In 2.15, Paul concludes his explanation of why his readers must see to it that no one takes them captive. And he does that by filling out the statement that Christ is the head of all rule and authority.

[27 : 13] He points to the cosmic scope of what God has done in the death of Christ. He says a little more than in 1.20 where we heard that the peace accomplished by the blood of Christ's cross embraces all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or

rulers or authorities.

Paul says that Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities. Christ put the rulers and authorities to open shame and he triumphed over them. The context suggests that Paul is referring to spiritual powers that were opposed to God.

These rulers and authorities were disarmed by the cancellation of the record of debt that stood against us. Satan, who we must assume is the power behind the rulers and authorities, is the accuser who accuses day and night before God.

We know that from Revelation 12.10. But with no accusation that can legitimately be made because the record of debt has been canceled, Satan and all of his minions have been stripped of their power against us.

So we must have a proper view of Satan and his demons. Spiritual harm has come from failing to recognize the existence of the demonic realm. Ignorance of Satan schemes and a reluctance to confront the enemy in biblically appropriate ways have opened the door to untold damage, oppression, and spiritual bondage.

[28 : 40] But on the other hand, there's an equally unbiblical obsession with the demonic that virtually attributes to them a power reserved for God and God alone. For some believers, it isn't the comforting assurance of Christ's gracious presence that thrills them, but the frightful prospect of a demon behind every bush that terrifies and paralyzes them, or a demon that is responsible for everything that goes wrong in their life that they may not like.

This passage in Colossians complements what Paul wrote in Ephesians 6.12 and 13. In Ephesians 6.12 and 13, Paul said, For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Therefore, take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Paul reminds us in Ephesians that the battle is ongoing.

Paul reminds us here in Colossians that even though the battle is ongoing, God has already won the war. The rulers and authorities have been more than disarmed.

They have been shamed. The imagery here is like that of a triumphant Roman general who parades his defeated captives through the streets of Rome. Christ's victory on the cross halted the demons in their attempts to stop his redemptive work, and it strips Satan of his powers.

[30 : 15] And that ties in with the triumph that Paul mentions at the end of the verse. Energized by Satan and his demons, the Romans had put Jesus to death. They had no trouble doing it.

They met no resistance. They themselves suffered no injury. He was the one who was stripped naked, and he was the one who was shamefully hung on the public gallows. So the triumph, if you judge by appearances, was all theirs.

But the truth is that the triumphant one was the one who died and later rose again. So everyone has a choice whether to follow human wisdom or to come to Christ.

To follow human wisdom is to be kidnapped by the emissaries of Satan and his false system, which leaves a person spiritually incomplete. To come to Christ is to come to the one who alone offers completeness.

Many of those of us who have found Christ never doubt his sufficiency, but others do. And so may those of us who have found Christ never doubt his sufficiency by turning aside to follow any other kind of human wisdom or try to add anything to the salvation that we have.

[31 : 25] Early in his commentary on this passage, John Woodhouse said that Christians often are anxious about two things. He said, On the one hand, there is anxiety about our failures.

We do not live up to what we perhaps think that a serious Christian should. We do not do all the things that we think a Christian should do. And there are things we do that we think a Christian should not do.

On the other hand, there is a related anxiety about what we might be missing. From time to time, we meet Christians who seem to have a level of spiritual experience or godly insight or God-centered living or something else that is way beyond our Christian life and experience.

And then Woodhouse ends his commentary on this section by the quote I put in your handout. He said, In other words, we need to remember the words of Colossians 2, 8-10, where Paul said, 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.

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. Thank you.