

# New Testament Studies

## Colossians

*(RVS Notes)*

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## Colossians—Complete in Christ

**Introduction**—Colossians is the most Christocentric epistle in the New Testament. It demonstrates the preeminence of Christ in creation, redemption, and practical living. A mindset elevating speculation, ritualism, mysticism, and ascetism threatened the believers at Colosse. Paul is emphatic. Our completion is in Christ, not in systems of speculation or legalistic observance.

Colosse was located in the Lycus Valley, approximately one hundred miles east of Ephesus. During the period of the Persian wars in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Colosse was a sizeable commercial center famous for its trade in black wool. By Paul's time, it was eclipsed in importance by the neighboring towns of Hierapolis and Laodicea and was in a period of decline. The church at Colosse was founded by Epaphras (1:7), who was with Paul at the time the apostle wrote the epistle (4:12-13). Epaphras may have become a Christian during Paul's Ephesian ministry (Acts 19), was active in the evangelization of Asia Minor (Acts 19:10), founding several churches in the Lycus Valley, and now was visiting Paul in prison to get his advice on how to deal with a dangerous heresy threatening the Colossian church.

**Author and occasion**—Paul wrote Colossians while under house arrest at Rome in the early 60s. It was written at the same time as Ephesians, perhaps just before the “queen of the epistles.” Epaphras turned to Paul for help in dealing with a heresy that blended Jewish legalism (2:11-17), Greek philosophical speculation (2:4; 8-10), and Oriental mysticism (2:18-23). Colosse's location on a major trade route contributed to the syncretistic character of this false teaching. The Colossian heresy may have been of the same order as that threatening the Galatian churches, except that the focus of the error concerned the person of Christ rather than his work.

Teachers promising a mystic knowledge of the fullness of God had gained entrance to the Colossian church. The teaching had the effect of downgrading the person of Christ (1:15-20) either by overemphasizing his transcendence or by diluting his essential humanity. It adopted a low view of the body (2:20-23), stressed the need for the legalistic observance of circumcision (2:11, 13), dietary regulations (2:16), and various ritualistic days and festivals (2:16), and laid a great emphasis on secret, deeper knowledge divorced from Biblical revelation (2:18). These features appear in later Gnosticism but the presence of Judaistic features suggests that the basic problem emanated from a legalistic and syncretistic Judaizing spirit augmented by Oriental philosophy and mysticism. For additional notes on the place and date of writing, see Prison Epistles section of the New Testament Introduction.

One of the primary attacks on the Paul's authorship of this letter is the idea that the false teaching addressed was second century Gnosticism, which arose long after Paul died. Gnosticism is a catch-all term for sects that were based on a sharp distinction between the spiritual and the physical realms. The spiritual was good, the physical evil and unredeemable. There were Gnostic tendencies in the first century, but it was in the second and third centuries that Gnosticism reached its greatest influence. Fully developed Gnosticism was not what the Colossians were encountering. The false teachers were an eclectic mix of Jewish legalism, Oriental philosophy, mystical knowledge, and Jewish and pagan asceticism all scrambled into something that looked like a prefiguring of early Gnosticism.

**Purpose**—The letter was written as an antidote to an intellectualism that exalted mysteries, secret knowledge, and wisdom, while discounting Christ by false philosophy. The corrective to such speculation is to exalt the person and work of Christ (1:15-20). Paul has a deep desire to present the Colossians complete in Christ, to exhort and instruct the believers to go onto spiritual maturity (1:28;

2:6-7).

We live in a syncretistic age. We live at a time when religious toleration is interpreted as meaning that any religion is just as good as another or that they all basically say the same thing. To many, the Lord Jesus is just one of several great religious teachers. Various influences promote themselves claiming to “enhance” our spirituality. They do not usually deny the Lord Jesus outright, but they do dethrone him and turn him into a misty figure of history, robbing him of his rightful place of preeminence. When we make the Lord Jesus and Christian revelation only part of a religious system or philosophy, we make him less than preeminent and deny the truth. When we strive for spiritual fulfillment by means of formulas, disciplines, rituals, or spiritual practices, we are not progressing in faith but retrogressing along a dangerous detour. Beware of deeper life teachers who offer a system for spiritual victory and fulfillment that bypass or minimize the Lord Jesus. Colossians warns us not to be deceived or beguiled, not to be taken in by hollow and deceptive thinking, and not to allow ourselves to be judged by bogus religiosity.

### ***Guiding Concepts:***

***High Christology***—The dominant theme of Colossians is the absolute supremacy and sole sufficiency of the Lord Jesus. Paul highlights the divine person and creative and redemptive work of Christ. The letter’s high Christology has practical implications for the believer’s everyday life and conduct. Christ is Lord of creation (1:16-17) and the author of our reconciliation with God (1:20-22; 2:13-15). He is the embodiment of full deity (1:15, 19; 2:9), the resurrected God-man (1:18; 3:1), and the all-sufficient Savior (1:28; 2:3, 10; 3:1-4). This Savior is the basis of the believer’s hope (1:5, 23, 27), the believer’s power to live a new life (1:11, 29), and the believer’s Redeemer (1:14, 20-22; 2:11-15).

***False teaching***—False teachers had infiltrated the congregation and were pressuring the Colossians to adopt their ideas. The chart below provides a summary:

| <b><i>False teaching</i></b>  | <b><i>Paul’s reply</i></b>   | <b><i>Texts</i></b>             |
|---|--|---------------------------------|
| Worship of angels, called thrones, rulers, powers, and authorities. | Christ created these powers, and he rules over them. Believers are delivered from their power.   | 1:13, 15-17; 2:9-10, 15, 18-19. |
| Angels are intermediaries between a transcendent God and humanity.  | Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity.  | 1:13-23; 2:6, 9-10.             |
| Taught submission to the “basic principles of the world”.           | Christ rules over the basic principles of the world, and Christians have died to them in Christ. | 2:8, 20.                        |
| Required physical circumcision for spiritual completion.            | Believers undergo a spiritual circumcision in Christ, experienced through baptism.               | 2:11-13.                        |
| Promoted special religious days and legalistic dietary rules.       | Ignore such rules. Believers have died to them, and their powers are cancelled.                  | 2:14, 16-17, 20-23.             |
| Salvation enhanced by special, secret knowledge.                    | Salvation by faith. God fills all believers with his wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.       | 1:9-10, 28; 2:2-4, 22           |

The false teaching was a syncretistic movement containing Jewish, pagan, and Christian elements. Its

insistence on legalism ritualism, and the observance of holy days reflected its Jewish element. Its philosophical character, its angel worship, and its asceticism pointed to its pagan element. This seemed to be a pre-Gnostic development. Gnosticism was a religio-philosophical attitude characterized by the belief in the evil of matter, in mediating beings between a completely transcendent God and all earthly creatures, and in salvation through secret knowledge. The transcendent God did not create this evil material world, one of his rogue *eons* (intermediaries) did. God put forth from himself a series of emanations (*eons*), each a little more distant from himself and having less deity. One broke away and created this evil earth. Paul's references to "thrones," "powers," "rulers," and "authorities" (1:16; 2:9, 15) and the "worship of angels" (2:18) are allusions to these intermediary beings. Belief in the evil of matter made it impossible for pre-Gnostics and full blown Gnosticism to accept the incarnation of the Lord Jesus and also led to a distorted and ascetic view of the Christian life. Their focus on knowledge (*gnosis* = knowledge) could be seen in their teaching that salvation came not through faith but through secret knowledge.

While the system was really a combination of Jewish and pagan elements, it wore a Christian mask. It did not deny the Lord Jesus, but completely dethroned him, making him one of the heavenly intermediaries of a completely transcendent God.

***Completeness in Christ***—The teaching that plagued the Colossians promised fullness in secret knowledge and wisdom. Paul counters by showing the Colossians that true completeness lies only in Christ.

***Relationship Between Ephesians and Colossians***—These two books share a common theme of Christ and his Church. Ephesians emphasizes the Church as Christ's body; Colossians emphasizes Christ as the head of the Church. These two letters contain many similar texts:

| <i>Eph</i> | <i>Col</i>  | <i>Eph</i> | <i>Col</i> |
|------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| 1:1-2      | 1:1-2       | 4:22-24    | 3:9-10     |
| 1:4        | 1:22        | 4:25-26    | 3:8-9      |
| 1:7        | 1:14        | 4:29       | 3:8; 4:6   |
| 1:10       | 1:20        | 4:31       | 3:8        |
| 1:15-16    | 1:3-4       | 4:32       | 3:12-13    |
| 1:21-23    | 1:16, 18-19 | 5:3-6      | 3:5-8      |
| 2:1-2      | 1:21        | 5:15       | 4:5        |
| 2:15       | 2:14        | 5:19-22    | 3:16-18    |
| 2:16       | 1:20        | 5:25       | 3:19       |
| 3:1-3      | 1:25-26     | 6:1-4      | 3:20-21    |
| 3:7-9      | 1:23ff      | 6:5-9      | 3:22-4:1   |
| 4:1        | 1:10        | 6:19-20    | 4:3-4      |
| 4:16       | 2:19        | 6:21-22    | 4:7-8      |

While the similarities are impressive, there are differences in the dynamics and tone of the two letters. Ephesians addresses the church at large with a general and universal tone, whereas Colossians radiates

the concerns of a particular local church and the dynamics of the spiritual battle raging within her midst.

***Summary Outline:*            Colossians—Complete in Christ**

- I.     Supremacy of Christ Over All Things (1:1-2:23)
  - A. Thanksgiving and petition for worthy walk (1:1-14)
  - B. Preeminence of Christ over all things (1:15-23)
  - C. Commissioned servant of Christ; Paul's labor for the Church (1:24-2:5)
  - D. Superiority of life in Christ over prescriptions of human traditions (2:6-23)
- II.    Submission to Christ in Holy Living (3:1-4:18)
  - A. Believer's position: Set your sights on things above (3:1-4)
  - B. Believer's practice: Guidelines for Christian living (3:5-4:6)
  - C. Final instructions, greetings, and benediction (4:7-18)

## Colossians—Complete in Christ

**I. Supremacy of Christ Over All Things (1:1-2:23)**—The Lord Jesus is supreme in creation (1:15-18), redemption (1:19-23), and in the Church (1:24-3:3). This is foundational to exposing the false teachers who would defraud the Colossians of their inheritance by rationalizations and vain philosophy (2:4-10), legalistic rituals (2:11-17), ethereal mysticism (2:18-19), and useless asceticism (2:20-23).

**A. Thanksgiving and petition for worthy walk (1:1-14)**—This section encompasses the salutation (1:1-2), Paul’s thanksgiving for the Colossians’ faith and love (1:3-8), and his petition for them (1:9-14).

**1. Salutation (1:1-2)**— Paul supplies his authority for writing. As an apostle, he was an authorized spokesman for God. Timothy is mentioned as well, but there is no indication that he contributed to the composition of the letter. The Colossians are described as holy and faithful brothers, that is that they were set apart for the service and worship of God and were fondly regarded members of an intimate community of faith. Grace denotes the favor of God and peace goes well beyond the absence of conflict and connotes a sense of wholeness and soundness.

**2. Thanksgiving for Colossians' faith and love (1:3-8)**—Paul notes the Colossians' faith (1:4), hope (1:5), and love (1:8). Their growing maturity was witnessed by the gospel's fruit in their lives and their understanding of God's grace (1:6). Paul expresses his thankfulness for the work of Epaphras through whom the Colossians had been instructed in the faith.

**1:7**—Epaphras may have founded the Colossian church. He was one of Paul's co-workers who pushed into the heartland of Asia Minor with the message of truth, possibly while the apostle was at Ephesus (see Acts 19:10). Epaphras was in Rome with Paul during his imprisonment (Phile. 23). His name is a shortened form of Epaphroditus. However, given the distance between Philippi and Colosse, it is unlikely that Epaphroditus mentioned in Philippians 2:25 and Epaphras in Colossians 1:7-8 and Philemon 23 are the same person.

**3. Petition for Colossians' worthy walk (1:9-14)**— Paul prays that the Colossians be filled with the knowledge of God and be enabled to live worthy lives for Christ. These worthy lives include being fruitful in good works, growing in the knowledge of God, being patient and long-suffering, and in giving thanks to God for the blessings of redemption. The leading ideas of this petition are expressed in four participles: “bearing fruit”, referring to every good work (1:10), “growing”, meaning that the growing knowledge of God is a key factor in Christian maturity (1:10), “being strengthened” speaks of empowerment to meet the demands of living in a hostile world (1:11), and “giving thanks” for redemption, their rescue from darkness to light and from guilt to the forgiveness of sins. This rescue is due to the wonderful redemptive work of the Lord Jesus (1:12-14).

**1:10**—The purpose of genuine knowledge is transformed character. Bearing fruit and growing in knowledge go together. As Augustine said: “Faith is understanding's step, and understanding is faith's reward.

**1:11**—Paul compounds terms for power in this verse: being strengthened (*dunamonmenoi*), power (*dunamei* = spiritual vitality), and might (*kratos* = power that overcomes resistance). These lead to endurance (*hupomone* = remaining in a difficult situation that does not easily succumb to suffering) and patience (*makrothumia* = a self-restraint that does not hastily retaliate). A lack of endurance can

result in losing heart; a lack of patience to outbursts of anger.

**1:13-14**— He delivered us, rescuing us from the guilt and rightful punishment of our sin. This deliverance was not to aimless wandering, but to his own kingdom of light and purpose. In his death and resurrection, he paid the penalty for sin and released us from our guilt and forgave us of our offenses.

**B. Preeminence of Christ over all things (1:15-23)**—Divine exaltation belongs to the Lord Jesus by reason of his redemptive work (1:13-14). In this passage, the Lord Jesus' supremacy is described in his relation to God (1:15a), to creation (1:15b-17), and because of his reconciling headship over the church, the new creation of humanity (1:18-23). The false teachers were depreciating the person of the Lord Jesus. At best, he was only one of the spirit beings emanating from God. This is one of the great Christological passages from Paul's pen, along with Colossians 2:9-Ephesians 1:20-23, and Philippians 2:5-11.

Paul mentions seven characteristics of the Lord Jesus which qualify him for supremacy:

- He is the image (*eikon*) of the invisible God (1:15a; see Heb. 1:3).
- He is also the firstborn (*prototokos*) over all creation (1:15b).
- He is the creator (1:16) and in him all things hold together (1:17).
- He is the head of the church (1:18a).
- He is the firstborn from among the dead (1:18b).
- In him dwells (*katoikesai*) the fullness (*pleroma*) of deity (1:19).
- Through him, God reconciles all things to himself (1:20).

**1. Over all creation (1:15-17)**—The Lord Jesus is the *image (eikon) of the invisible God* (1:15a, see Heb. 1:3). Image means the very substance or essential embodiment of something or someone. He is also the *firstborn over all creation* (1:15b). This denotes two things: he precedes the entire creation, and he is sovereign over it. He is firstborn in the unique sense of being supreme, not a created being at all. He is *the Creator* (1:16-17). All things were created by him, for him, and in him all things are held together. He is the instrumental, final, and constituting cause of everything that exists. Christ is not only the One through whom all things came to be, but also the One by whom they continue to exist (see Jn. 1:3; Heb. 1:2).

**2. Over the church: Reconciling headship (1:18-23)**—Besides being Lord of the universe, Christ is also the *head of the church* (1:18a, see Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23). He is *the firstborn from among the dead* (1:18b). He is the first to rise in an immortal body (1 Cor. 15:20) and heads the new creation as its Sovereign. In him is the *fullness (pleroma) of deity* (1:19). *Pleroma* is a key word in Colossians and is used in 1:19 and 2:9. The verb *pleroo* is used in 1:9, 25; 2:10; and in 4:17. *Pleroma* and its verbal kin means “completeness” and is used of God's being (Eph. 3:19), of time in God's plan (Gal. 4:4), and of God's grace in Christ (Jn. 1:16). It was a term used by the false teachers for the totality of supernatural powers that they believed controlled people's lives. For Paul, the totality of divine powers and attributes exists only in Christ. For the false teachers, Christ was only one of the intermediaries between God and the world and not sufficient for all the needs of humanity. Paul contradicts this idea of God's complete transcendence by noting that full and complete deity “dwells” (*katoikesai* = abide lastingly or permanently) in the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, the Lord Jesus *reconciles people to God* (1:20).

**1:20-23**— The Father was pleased to reconcile all things to himself through the Lord Jesus (1:20). All

enmity between God and humanity is removed and humanity is brought back to a condition of being in harmony with God. “All things” must be understood in the broader Scriptural context. This text is not teaching universalism. The universal subordination of all things to Christ does not mean universal salvation. Paul is not saying that everyone and everything will be brought to a saving relationship with God. This statement is a reference to the cosmic significance of Christ’s redemptive work, akin to texts like Romans 8:19-22. Christ’s reconciling work overcame the hostility of the Colossians which was formerly expressed in their deeds. Now the Colossians are set apart to him without blemish and free from accusation. They now look forward to a glorious future as they continue in their faith. Paul speaks of the gospel proclaimed throughout creation, not as a premature announcement of the accomplishment of the Great Commission, but to counter the false teachers who claimed secret, esoteric revelations (see 2:18).

Three things come at us in these verses:

- It is by looking at the Lord Jesus that we discover who God is. The Lord Jesus is the mirror-image of the Father.
- The Lord Jesus holds together the old creation and the new creation. He created all things with a lavish and generous beauty, but it is fallen, grown ugly and evil, summed up in death. God has acted to heal the world of wickedness and corruption. The Lord Jesus through whom the world was made originally is the same Jesus through whom the world is redeemed and remade a new creation.
- The Lord Jesus is the blueprint for our genuine humanity offered to us in the gospel.

In the Judaism of Paul's day, much of what the apostle says of the Lord Jesus in this text was said of a personified figure of wisdom. A significant part of Paul's point here is that if it is wisdom you want, the Lord Jesus is where you have to look.

**C. Commissioned servant of Christ: Paul’s labor for the Church (1:24-2:7)**—Paul labors that he may present believers complete in Christ. In Christ is found the revelation of the mystery of the Lord’s reconciling work (1:24-27), the believers’ completion (1:28-29), and all wisdom and knowledge (2:1-5). Paul concludes this portion of the text by exhorting the Colossians to continue strengthened in faith as they were taught and overflowing with thanksgiving (2:6-7).

These last two verses encapsulate his fundamental message to them. They also were the theme verses of a Navigator discipleship program. In the Christian life we never really stand still. We either progress or we regress. Our regression is not always obvious. We need to be honest and discerning about ourselves and outside influences.

**Illustration**—One commentator compared the need to progress in the faith with riding a bicycle. You simply cannot keep your balance for very long without moving forward.

**1. Paul labors to present everyone complete in Christ (1:24-29)**—Paul describes his suffering for the Gentiles (1:24), and his preaching ministry, including his calling to preach (1:25), his message (1:25-28), the method he employed in preaching (1:28), and his ultimate ministerial aim (1:28-29).

**1:24**—Paul speaks of his sufferings for the Gentiles as a benefit to them and as making up in his flesh what was lacking in Christ's afflictions. What is he talking about? Is he saying that there was something lacking in the redemptive sufferings of the Lord Jesus? Paul's sufferings did benefit the young churches in that, by giving Paul a tough time, those persecuting the apostle were not bothering the young Christians growing up around him. He was drawing enemy fire while the young church



hunkered down. As for his comments on Christ's afflictions, we need to have our identification with Christ front and center. He sees his sufferings as part of the king's afflictions, not in a redemptive sense but in an identification sense with the Lord's person. It is not an addition to the King's redemptive suffering (that is not needed, see Rom. 3:21-26; Heb. 10:10-14), it is an extension of the Lord's suffering in identification with the apostle's sovereign Lord. It is the believer's privilege to follow in his or her Lord's train and suffer for Christ (see 2 Tim. 3:11; 1 Pt. 3:13-14; 5:9; Heb. 10:32). There is a cultural backdrop here. Jewish people believed that some suffering had to be endured before the end would come. They described these as "Messiah's birth pangs."

**1:26-27**—Mystery (*musterion*) is truth once concealed now made known by divine revelation. It is used six times in Ephesians (1:9; 3:3-9; 5:22; 6:19) and four times in this letter (1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3). In Colossians, the mystery refers to "Christ in you, the hope of glory". Christ living in the believer is the ground for the certainty of a complete salvation (see Eph. 1:13-14).

**1:28-29**—Paul's task was to take the gospel to the Gentiles, to present believers complete in Christ by proclaiming, admonishing, exhorting, and instructing them in the faith (1:28). He speaks to Gentiles in Colosse so that this is the corollary to the mystery disclosed in Ephesians 3, that the Gentiles were full partners in the faith (see Eph. 3:6) and the breaking down of distinctions between Jew and Gentile (see Eph. 2:12-14). Mystery does not have the connotation of secret teaching known only to an exclusive group.

**2. Purpose of labor: Mystery of God in Christ (2:1-5)**—These verses relate to Paul's ministry of intercession. He labored in prayer for them that they might be encouraged in heart and mind in love and in the mystery of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2:1-3 express his prayerful activity so that the false teachers would not deceive the Colossians and lead them away from their convictions concerning the Lord Jesus. He concludes by expressing his confidence in them, delighted by their good order and firm faith.

**2:4**—Many in antiquity were trained in rhetoric and the art of persuasive speech. Sages criticized public speakers for the unethical use of persuasion, regardless of truth.

**2:5**—Paul uses military imagery in this description, seeing the Colossians as an army under attack and affirming their unbroken lines and their unshaken ranks.

**3. Continue to live in Christ (2:6-7)**—Paul concludes this portion of the text by exhorting the Colossians to remain true to the Lord Jesus. In 2:7, four participles describe our faith walk in Christ. Rooted and built up in him translate the first two. Rooted (*errizomenoi*) is in the perfect tense and suggests a once for all reality. That is, we are permanently rooted in the Lord Jesus. Built up (*epoikodomoumenoi*) is in the present tense indicating a continual process. Strengthened (*bebaioumenoi*) in the faith is in the present tense involves their continuing instruction in the faith. Overflowing (*perisseuontes*) with thankfulness is also in the present tense. The word is sometimes translated "abounding" and conveys that thanksgiving is to be a continual and habitual thing for believers. The word picture is a river overflowing its banks.

This concludes a portion of the text where we are informed that divine exaltation belongs to the Lord Jesus (1:15-20) and that in him are found reconciliation to God (1:21-23), the revelation of the mystery of the person and work of Christ (1:24-27), the believer's completion in him (1:28-29), and that all wisdom and knowledge are found in the Lord Jesus (2:1-5).

**D. Superiority of life in Christ over prescriptions of human traditions (2:8-23)**— Paul warns the Colossians against the error of false philosophy (2:8-15), the error of legalism (2:16-17), the error of angel worship (2:18-19), and the error of asceticism (2:20-23). They were not to be captive to hollow and deceptive philosophy depending on human traditions and the elementary principles of the world (2:8). They were not to let anyone judge them in accordance to dietary rules or religious ritual observance (2:16). They were not to submit to ascetic prescriptions that had the appearance of wisdom but lacked any value in restraining sensual indulgence (2:21, 23).

**1. Fullness in Christ: Rebuke of deceptive philosophy and human tradition (2:8-15)**— Paul condemns the false teaching that was diverting the Colossians from following the Lord Jesus. This false teaching was hollow (*akenes* = empty) and deceptive philosophy that was based on human traditions and the basic principles of this world (2:8). Human traditions probably mean the various pagan traditions of the day, and the basic principles of the world, probably mean the elemental spirits of the universe. There is no fullness (*pleroma*) in a philosophy based on vain human reasoning. *Pleroma* was used by the later Gnostics to describe the absolute transcendence of God who had no direct contact with earth.

To the contrary, says Paul, the transcendent God walked on earth in bodily form, a clear reference to the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus. In his reply he asserts Christ's unshared supremacy (2:9) and his complete adequacy to meet all human need (2:10-15). Believers are full or complete in Christ in our vital union with him. His sufficiency includes our spiritual circumcision (2:11-12), forgiveness of sins (2:13-14), and victory over all evil forces (2:15).

Note Christ's work on our behalf in this portion of the text: (1) we are made complete in Christ (2:10); (2) we are identified with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (2:11-12); he made us alive with him, bearing our sins on the Cross (2:13-14); and (4) he made a spectacle of our spiritual enemies at Calvary (2:15). The phrase "making our enemies a public spectacle" referenced the triumphal processions of Roman generals, where defeated opponents were displayed during the parade.

**2:8**—He warns them not to allow anyone "to take you captive" (*sylagogen*), a term remarkably close to "synagogue". Paul engages in a word play aimed at the Jewish legalists that were plaguing the Galatians.

**2:11-12**—In him, believers have true circumcision, the reality symbolized by the ancient Mosaic rite. The circumcision believers receive is spiritual, relating to our inner being. In other passages of Scripture, it is described as the circumcision of heart (Rom. 2:28; Phil. 3:3; see also Deut. 10:16; 30:6). Christian baptism is the outward counterpart to the experience of spiritual circumcision and the means by which it is openly declared.

**2:13-14**—We were dead in our trespasses and sins and then made alive in union with the Lord Jesus. Our forgiveness cancels the written code and its regulations, wiping out what stood against us. The law is the written regulations which were against us and stood opposed to us. Paul uses a vivid metaphor for the law's cancellation—nailing the law to the Cross. The law, viewed in this text as a bond of indebtedness or an instrument of condemnation, is destroyed as a basis for accusation by the Cross of the Lord Jesus.

**2:15**—Paul affirms that Christ disarmed the forces of evil, the hostile supernatural powers in rebellion against God. Furthermore, he made a public spectacle of them, exposing them to disgrace by exhibiting them to the universe as captives. The idea recalls the triumph parade of a victorious Roman general with a wretched company of vanquished foes displayed as the spoils of victory.

**2. Do not be judged by legalistic traditions (2:16-23)**— One of the appeals of Judaism to the pagan world at the time was its high moral code. The Colossians, Gentile pagans in their background, might have been persuaded that the regulations of the Mosaic Code and the numerous explanations by the rabbis, were going to be a significant help in finding a new way of life.

The human traditions Paul condemns are elaborated in 2:16-23. They consisted of food, Sabbath, and festival regulations reminiscent of the Old Testament regimen. They were ascetic in their treatment of the body (2:20, 23), and in confusing worldly wisdom with spiritual discernment (2:23). This section of the text fleshes out this characterization of error and shows how the Lord Jesus is far superior to human traditions and regulations.

Paul urges the Colossians not to submit to legalistic traditions and rituals which originate in fleshly, worldly thinking. Dietary, ceremonial, and ascetic regulations and rites are spiritually impotent and do not restrain sensual indulgence. The death of Christ overthrew the elementary principles of the world. Since believers participate in that victory (2:20), they should not submit again to a regulatory religion that is unable to supply the power necessary to live victoriously (2:21-23).

These legalistic traditions encompassed both the errors of legalism (2:16-17), angel worship (2:18-19), and asceticism (2:20-23).

**2:16-17**—The false teachers laid down a rigid dietary regiment and an onerous schedule of religious observances. There is something about advertised religious routine that has the tendency to inflate the ego and make people contentedly self-righteous. You can measure your spiritual life and even subtly brag about it.

Considering what Christ did in removing us from under the law and triumphing over the evil forces, the Colossians were not to allow anyone to judge their standing before God by their observance of the Mosaic Code. The Jewish dietary restrictions and religious ritual festivals are clearly in view. The New Moon and Sabbath observances are specifically mentioned. The Colossians were not to cling to the prophetic shadow and obscure the spiritual reality of which those things were to prefigure.

**2:18-19**— Angel worship may have usurped the rightful place of Christ as the only mediator between God and humanity (see 1 Tim. 2:15). The Colossians were urged to worship angels as intermediary spirits between the transcendent God and humanity. The false teachers were claiming visions involving the worship of intermediary beings and seeking to impose this rigmarole on the Colossians. There is a certain fascination with bogus religious mysticism that attracts. Learning mysteries, initiations into inner secrets, contact with the spirit world, and being “in the know” is exciting at first and empty in the end. Paul asserts that such teacher or teachers were without contact with the Lord Jesus and cut off from any source of spiritual vitality. He is telling them not to let anyone deny your claim to be Christian by such poppycock.

**2:20-23**— Asceticism is a frequent companion of legalism. It is a pseudo-spiritual position that revels in rules of physical self-denial. Such rules are based on human teaching and appear to be wise but are not. Beating down the flesh is worthless for dealing with carnal passions. Indeed, physical self-denial only arouses the passion it denies. A religion of rules leaves untouched the moral problems that flow from the unregenerate soul.

Paul warns against asceticism, the imposition of human rules as a means of gaining favor with God. The false teachers saw the body as evil and the way to holiness as denying the body’s desires, refusing its appetites, and cutting the body’s needs to an absolute minimum. Paul urges the Colossians to reject asceticism as a way of life. When we came to Christ, they were delivered from “the basic principles of

this world.” To order their lives by ascetic rules was to revert to an inferior state they abandoned at conversion. The ascetic regulations dealt with matters temporary and unimportant from which they were delivered by Christ. Paul goes on to remark how asceticism masquerades as wisdom, seeming to be expressions of devotion to God and commendable discipline of the body, and spurious humility in self-prescriptions. Indwelt by the Spirit, the Colossians were to walk by the Spirit and avoid the spurious parade of self-denial.

**Query**—What is the place of the spiritual disciplines? Paul is not denying the need for discipline in our lives, which will involve self-denial. Where are the boundaries between asceticism and spiritual discipline involving our bodies?

**II. Submission to Christ in Holy Living (3:1-4:18)**—Having been raised with the Lord Jesus in his Resurrection, believers should set their hearts and minds on heavenly things (3:1-4), put to death sinful practices (3:5-11), and live virtuous lives clothed with Christ’s righteousness (3:12-17). This in turn should affect their family lives (3:18-4:1), their prayer lives (4:2-4), and their lives in the public arena (4:5-6). Paul concludes with final instructions, greetings, and a benediction (4:7-18).

**A. Believer’s position: Set your sights on things above (3:1-4)**—Believers are to focus on eternal, not temporal things. Paul is not advocating the bogus asceticism he just condemned (2:20-23). While the transitory things of earth certainly can be received and enjoyed as from the good hand of God, to concentrate our attention to these things is foolhardy. The apostle is saying that we are, by the grace of God, eternal beings and that eternity ought to be our focus. Paul delineates our death, resurrection, and future enthronement in glory with Christ as the reason for adopting an eternal perspective. We are exhorted to remember who we are.

**3:1-4**—The believer’s union with Christ is the root principle of the Christian life. This union releases into the believer’s life power that is more than adequate to counteract the appetites and attitudes of the lower nature. Paul exhorts the believers to seek heavenly things (3:1), to set their minds on them (3:2), reminding them that they live now in a different sphere of being (3:3), and that when Christ appears, there will be a glorious manifestation of who they truly are (3:4).

**Illustration**—Senator Hubert Humphrey once made a telling remark about politics in general: “You must remember that in politics, how you stand depends on where you sit.” He was referring to the political party seating arrangement in the Senate and the pressure of the votes on specific legislation. Something akin to this is true of our spiritual lives: How we stand and walk depends on where we sit. We are seated with Christ in the heavenly and that reality must pervade our earthly lives and agendas.

**3:1**—Our attitudes, ambitions, and entire outlook on life are to be molded by our relationship with Christ. Our allegiance to him takes precedence over all earthly allegiances.

**3:2**—Setting your heart on things above is descriptive of one’s aim for the practical pursuit of Christian living. Setting your mind on things above refers to a person’s inner disposition. The Lord calls us to see everything against the backdrop of eternity. To preoccupy ourselves with wealth, worldly honor, power, and pleasures is an unworthy detour for those who have been raised with Christ and look forward to sharing his eternal glory.

**3:3-4**—Since we have died with Christ, all that is alien to him should be alien to us. Our identity in Christ should draw us to the prospect of our future manifestation with Christ in glory.

**B. Believer’s practice: Guidelines for Christian living (3:5-4:6)**—Paul exhorts the Colossians to

allow the life that is in them by virtue of their union with Christ to work itself out and express itself in all their thoughts, actions, and relationships. The sins of the old life are to be abandoned (3:5-11), the virtues of the new life are to be cultivated (3:12-17), family relationships are to be strengthened (3:18-4:1), and our Christian duties, particularly relating to their prayer lives and to wise behavior with outsiders, are to be faithfully performed (4:2-6).

**1. Put off the old; put on the new (3:5-17)**—Paul lists actions and attitudes to put off and put on. Colossians 3:9-10 is the key to this text. The Colossians were to put off the old clothes and put on the new apparel. They were to remove the grave clothes of the old life (3:5-11) and clothe themselves in the raiment of the Spirit (3:12-17). He speaks of what they must put to death (3:5), what they must rid themselves of (3:8), and what they must stop doing (3:9). He lists two primary areas of behavior—sexual sins and sins of anger and wrong speech. Then he speaks of the virtues of the new life that are to be cultivated (3:12-14), the peace of Christ that should rule their hearts (3:15), the Word of Christ that should dwell in them richly (3:16), and the recognition of the authority that should be pervasive in their living (3:17).

**3:5-9**—This section informs us what to put off. The command calls for decisive action. Mortify the flesh! Ditch the grave clothes! Do it now! There is an urgent need to excise the degrading tendencies of the old nature. We are to cast aside the old way of life which springs from our fleshly desires.

**3:5-7**—All of these sins relate to sexual vice. Consider the line-up—sexual immorality (*porneia* = habitual immorality), impurity (*akatharsia* = uncleanness in thought, word, or act), lust (*pathos* = uncontrolled desire), evil desires (*epithymian kaken*), and greed (*pleonexian* = greedy rapacity that entirely disregards the rights and welfare of others). These are things that belong to the sinful nature and are to be put to death (*nekrosate*). The old life is dead; believers must let it die. They were to root out the habits of the old life and eliminate them.

**3:8-9**—These verses contain another list of vices, this set affecting other people and centering on anger and wrong speech. Paul warns of the dangers of social sins. Anger, rage, malice (wrath and outbursts against others) are sins of disposition. Slander (malicious allegations meant to tear people down), and filthy language (including coarse jesting) denote abusive speech. In 3:9, he tells them bluntly to stop lying! We are to rid (*apothesthe*) ourselves of these sins, to put them off like a filthy suit of clothes.

**3:10-17**—The new person needs constant renewal or refreshing to be victorious over sin (see 3:10; Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 4:23). This renewal is to be in knowledge and in the image of our Creator. In this new creation of Christ, distinctions based on ethnic, religious, social, or economic factors are abolished. Colossians 3:12-17 lists virtues believers are to put on. These graces are the work of God by his Spirit as the peace of Christ rules our hearts and the Word of God be at home in us profitably. While the list of vices in 3:5, 8-9 are social irritants, the virtues designated in 3:12-14 are social ointment.

**3:12-17**—New life in the Spirit; new threads in our spiritual apparel. These verses describe the virtues of the new life that are to be cultivated (3:12-14), the rule of peace that should rule our hearts (3:15), the word of Christ that should be at home in us (3:16), and the recognition of the authority of the Lord Jesus' name (3:17). Paul's appeal is based on the reality that Christians are chosen by God, set apart by and for him, and are dearly loved by him.

**3:12-14**—Verse 12 lists five great Christian virtues:

- Compassion (*splanchna oiktirmou*) (literally, bowels of compassion = pity and tenderness for

the suffering and the miserable). We all find ourselves in a tough struggle at times.

Compassion is an attitude of heart that makes us encouraging people who are easy to be with.

- Kindness (*chrestotes* = goodness, graciousness, sweetness of disposition).
- Humility (*tapeinophrosyne* = humble disposition born of thinking of ourselves against a higher nature).
- Gentleness (*prautes* = a person considerate of others' rights and feelings). Humility and gentleness go together. There is an easy deference towards others accompanied by a considerate spirit.
- Patience and bearing with each other (*makrothumia* = long-suffering, a self-restraint that bears injury and insult without retaliating).

Forgiveness and putting on love concludes the list. These virtues reduce or eliminate friction between people. They are indeed manifestations of love (*agape* = caring love or regard).

**3:15**—The peace of Christ ruling in our hearts flags that we are doing God's will. The peace of God is to operate as an umpire in our individual and corporate lives. When there is peace in our hearts, there is praise and thanksgiving on our lips.

**3:16**—The Word of God is to dwell, that is to be at home, in our hearts. We are to be instructed and admonished in all wisdom by the Word. This type of instruction is to be accompanied by song, from the psalter, the rich hymnody of the church, and the spiritual songs that the Spirit has inspired in every age.

**3:17**—Do all in the name of Christ conveys our identification with Christ, that we belong to him. His honor is at risk in our lives. We are to act in a way that represents well our glorious Lord and Savior. This was a necessary word for the Colossians who were from a Gentile background. For most pagan religions of the time, religious practices were ritual observances that did not cast moral influence over one's daily life.

**2. Conduct in Christian households (3:18-4:1)**—Paul specifically addresses husbands and wives (3:18-19), fathers and children (3:20-21), and masters and slaves (3:22-4:1).

Aristotle had developed household codes directing how a man was to rule his wife, children, and slaves properly. Paul adopts this household code-thinking but modifies it considerably. This is a very brief household code. It is unusual in the lack of directions to wives, children, and slaves as to specific behavior. It speaks in general terms. It is also unusual in that it treats duties and responsibilities as reciprocal. Husbands, parents, and masters are not without accountability.

**3:18-19**—These verses address husbands and wives (also see Eph. 5:21-33). Wives are to submit to their husbands and husbands are to love their wives. The context indicates that the wife's deference is prompted and warranted by her husband's unselfish love, is voluntary, and is "fitting in the Lord." The husband's love reflects the principle of mutual love and deference. Husbands are not to be harsh. The term suggests a surly, irritable attitude. "Don't be cross with your wife" renders the sense. Paul emphasizes mutual respect and love between married couples, something the moralists of the day seldomly did.

The tone is decidedly different than most ancient household codes. All ancient moralists insisted that wives should "submit" to their husbands. Most continued by insisting that they "obey" as well. Paul stops short of that. In addition, the ancient codes stressed how husbands were to "rule" their wives and households. Few stressed loving their wives.

Some see this as functional subordination within a relationship of essential equality and go elsewhere in Paul's writings for the reasons for this: the creation order (see 1 Tim. 2:13), the manner of sin's entrance into the human race (see 1 Tim. 2:14), and the order within the Godhead itself (see 1 Cor. 11:3). Others see this command of submission as a mutual submission, addressing the genders in their specific areas of need.

**3:20-21**—These verses address fathers and children (also see Eph. 6:1-4). Children are to obey their parents “in all things.” Roman law allowed the father to demand obedience even of adult children. However, customs dictated that adult children no longer living with their parents were only expected to honor their parents. In the Old Testament, disobeying parents was considered rebellion against the Lord and was harshly punished (see Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9). Fathers (note that the word translated “fathers” here is translated “parents” in Hebrews 11:23 (NIV)) are not to provoke or embitter their children by harsh and insensitive attitudes or actions but encourage them. In an encouraging Christian home, a child should find refuge from constant turmoil and find strength to carry the burdens of a growing maturity. He or she should find loving hearts, watchful eyes, listening ears, and helpful hands.

**3:25-4:1**—Slaves are to obey their masters as unto the Lord (3:22). This obedience was to be genuine; they were to work heartily for their master. Their work was an index of their devotion to the Lord (3:22-23) and would be judged by God (3:24-25). Likewise, masters were instructed to be fair (4:1), remembering that they are accountable to a heavenly Master. Neither Paul nor the other writers of the New Testament denounced slavery or demanded its immediate overthrow. Slavery was considered an institution indispensable to society. They could not think of society without slavery any more than we would think of our society without electricity or automobiles.

In our modern employment scene, this translates to the employee being genuinely concerned about the employer's best interest. Christians are to see their work as unto the Lord. It is to be honest, ungrudging, and faithful. Work so rendered imparts a sense of dignity, no matter how unimportant the actual labor may seem. Employers are to be fair-minded, genuinely concerned about being equitable and attendant to the employees' welfare.

**3. Further exhortation to prayer and gracious conduct (4:2-6)**—This section of the text relates to the faithful performance of Christian duties, namely prayer (4:2-4) and maintaining a witness in the wider world (4:5-6). Prayer is to be persistent and fervent. They were to be spiritually alert people and being watchful, active, and thankful in prayer. In addition, they were to live in an exemplary way in the greater society to give the lie to much of the slander that came toward Christians in that day. They were not to antagonize and alienate their neighbors. They were to pray for practical wisdom in making the most of the opportunities for witnessing to the faith. Their witness was to be winsome, marked by purity and wholesomeness. They were to walk wisely and speak graciously. This is akin to the direction given in Ephesians 5:15, where Paul counsels the believers to buying up the opportunities or fit times to be a witness to, and a servant of, the Lord Jesus.

**C. Final instructions, greetings, and benediction (4:7-18)**—Paul commends Tychicus (4:7-8) and Onesimus (4:9), sends greetings to the Colossians from six of his fellow workers (4:10-15), gives some instructions concerning the Colossian letter and the letter coming from Laodicea as well as some advice for Archippus (4:16-17), and pronounces a benediction (4:18). Tychicus was the bearer of the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, who was a member of the Colossian congregation. The letter to Philemon focuses on the situation of Onesimus, a runaway slave turned Christian brother.

Archippus may have been the interim pastor of the Colossian church in Epaphras' absence.

**4:7-9**—Paul commends Tychicus was the bearer of both Ephesians and Colossians (4:7-8; see Eph. 6:21-22). He was accompanied by Onesimus, who was a member of the Colossian congregation. Tychicus would deliver news about Paul to the Colossian congregation.

Onesimus is the same person as referred to in Philemon 10. An Onesimus became a bishop of Ephesus in the early second century. Of course, we cannot be certain that he was the person mentioned here, indeed probably was not. But would not it be great if we were wrong. From runaway slave and thief to the chief shepherd of the most prominent church in Asia Minor, the heartland of early Christianity, speaks of a tale of transformation like few others.

**4:10-15**—Paul sends greetings from his co-workers. That Paul sent greetings from Jewish and Gentile workers engaged in spiritual ministry together would have struck ancient readers as far more profound than modern readers can surmise. Of note is that Mark is with Paul (4:10). Paul was reconciled to Mark after the fallout from Mark's desertion of the missionary team during the first missionary journey (see Acts 13:5, 13; 15:36-40; 2 Tim. 4:11). Epaphras' faithfulness in the work of the ministry and in laboring in prayer (see 1:7-8; 4:12-13) is worthy of imitation. Laboring in prayer ranks a person high in spiritual stature. Paul also mentions Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, who later deserted him (see 2 Tim. 4:10).

In these extensive greetings at the end of his letters, the point Paul is making the point that Christians belong to each other in a fellowship of mutual regard, prayer, instruction, and service. The gospel is not about abstract ideas but about God and people, about word made flesh in the Lord Jesus, about the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus inaugurating the new creation and our place in it, and that God is supremely the God of redemptive love.

**4:13**—The three largest cities in the Lycus Valley of Phrygia were Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse. Colosse was the least significant of the three, a fading community.

**4:14**—Luke may have studied medicine in Laodicea (there is evidence of a significant medical practice in that city) or he have practiced medicine in Hierapolis before his conversion. Again, just speculation.

**4:16-18**—Paul's letter to the Laodiceans is no longer extant. However, some commentators think it may refer to our current letter to the Ephesians. Virtually all reading was aloud. Letters would have been read by one person to the group. Archippus (4:17; Phile. 2) was probably the leader of the Colossian congregation in Epaphras' absence. The congregation met in his home (Phile. 2).



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