

## Freedom from guilt and shame (Colossians 2:2-23)

### The Power of the Cross (Colin Hughes)

Sunday Evening 22 March 2009

2 My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. 5 For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10 and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. 11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. 18 Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. 19 He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

20 Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 21 "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? 22 These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. 23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Paul was writing to the Colossians because, just as those in Laodicea, they were being intimidated by some who taught a corrupt version of the gospel. Rather than preaching the freedom found in the sufficiency of Christ alone they were enslaving them through false teachings. In the opening verses of our passage Saint Paul writes, "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments." (Colossians 2:2-4)

The particular heresies which Paul was battling against continue to plague and undermine our Church today. They are heresies which teach that our relationship with God depends on something more than Christ. In other words, our faith is rooted in Christ plus something else. In particular the Colossians were told that they needed Christ plus rationalism: which means human wisdom and philosophy; Christ plus legalism: which means the keeping of certain ceremonies or rituals; Christ plus mysticism: which means the necessity to experience certain supernatural experiences; and Christ plus asceticism: which means denying oneself of certain physical experiences.

This is why Paul says, in verse 6 and 7, "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."

Paul was determined to teach the sufficiency of Christ. In verses 9 and 10 he boldly declares, "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ." That is, in Christ we are complete. Nothing more need be added.

With this in mind we shall consider each of the four heresies that Paul attacks so that, to quote him again, "no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."

So great is our respect for the intellectuals of our day and the advances of modern science that we are all too willing to compromise the clear and straight-forward teaching of the Word of God in favour of it. We all too easily believe that although the intentions of the writers of the Bible were honourable, they could not possibly know what we know today, so often they wrote in ignorance. As if the latest scientific findings or a particularly insightful thought might somehow reveal a flaw in the primitive thinking of those charged by God to pen His Word. Rationalism is the belief that truth is determined through human reason as much as through God's divine revelation. In fact, the logical corollary of this heresy is that either God was incapable of expressing Himself fully through His Word or God Himself was ignorant in the past, and it is through our human endeavours that we have provided God with a clarity He was not capable of expressing or did not possess in the past.

Of course this suggestion is as blasphemous as it is ridiculous! God left no blank pages in His Word for us to add our own version or interpretation. He has said all that needs to be said in the most perfect way possible. From the very first verse of Genesis to the last verse of Revelation, Scripture is clear in the teaching the sufficiency of Christ. Our

relationship with God does not depend on Christ plus some higher or deeper understanding of God's Word. If we never understood anything more in this world than our hope being found in Christ alone then we have grasped everything that is necessary.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not anti-intellectual. If we were to declare our love for someone and yet not spend any time at all trying to get to know them then the sincerity of our love would be questionable. In the same way, to say that we love Christ but remain unwilling to get to know Him would indicate that our love is at best shallow, at worst a lie. It is right and proper that we spend much of our lives pursuing a knowledge of God, which we call theology. However, in doing so we must be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that because we have obtained a deeper understanding of God in some respect than other people that our relationship is somehow better. However well we might grasp the depths of the Word of God, we can do nothing to add to the fullness we have already received in Christ. In what really matters, in being rooted in Christ, all are equal in the sight of God.

In verse 11 Paul talks about being circumcised and explains that it is not a circumcision done by hands, but a circumcision done by Christ. The word, circumcision, literally means to cut around. This powerful symbol serves to show that Christ has cut away the sins of the flesh. And just as Jews were marked to be physically different through this ceremony, so too this "circumcision done by Christ" reminds us that we are called to be different. In verse 12 Paul goes on to explain that we are buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him from the dead. Yet another clear reminder that when we put our faith in Christ we are placed into His death and through Christ's actions on the cross and His resurrection we are transformed from death to life.

In verse 13 he reminds us that whilst we were dead in sins and the uncircumcision of our sinful nature God made us alive with Christ. And then Paul goes on to say something quite wonderful. He tells us that God forgave us our sins and He cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that were against us and stood to oppose us.

The Greek word, cancelled, that Paul uses in verse 14 means to be blotted out, obliterated, or wiped away. During New Testament times it was common for writers to use papyrus made from reeds or velum which was made from animal skins. As the inks did not contain acids, as they do today, they would sit on the top layer of the paper. These materials were very expensive, so if the writer wished to use it again they would use something wet to wipe it clean. It is this idea that Paul shares when he talks about God cancelling, or wiping clean, the written code that stood against us. And then Paul continues to explain that God took it away by nailing it to the cross. This is almost beyond anything we can imagine. God took all of our sins and in the death of Christ, by nailing them to the cross, they were erased, as if they were never written. In Christ we have complete forgiveness.

Are we beginning to see that it is not only foolishness to think that we can add anything to this, but it offends the extent of the sacrifice that Christ made upon that cross?

In verse 16, Paul next combats the heresy of legalism. He encourages the Colossians by telling them that no one should judge them by what they eat or drink or even if they do not observe the Sabbath day. God gave the laws to His people to set them apart from the evil and corrupt nations that surrounded them. They called His people to a different way of living that marked them as chosen. In complete contrast to the other nations their ultimate purpose was to remind God's people of the perfect, uncompromising

holiness of God. So instead of looking out into the world for their answers they would look towards God as the source of all that was good. But in verse 17 Paul explains that the laws were a shadow of what was to come; the reality of God's righteousness is found in Christ. In other words, the law stood only as a dim and temporary substitute for the perfect Christ who was to come. Thus to put our faith in the law is to say that Christ has not yet come. Through the gift of faith our eyes are opened to see that in Christ is our righteousness. In Romans 5:18-19 Paul writes, "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man (referring to Adam) the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man (Christ) the many will be made righteous."

And in the third chapter of Philippians Paul could not put the folly of pursuing our righteousness through the law any better. In this passage he refers to those who were trying to drag the believers back into legalism, who demanded that the gentile converts be circumcised and they observe the laws of Moses to gain favour with God, as dogs; the image of dogs barking at and biting the faithful believers is remarkably vivid. Listen carefully to what Paul wrote.

"Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith." (Philippians 3:2-9)

Returning to our passage, in verse 18 and 19, Paul goes on to condemn the mystics. They tried to intimidate the Colossians by telling them that unless they had visions of angels or had some other spiritual experience then they were not true Christians.

Tragically, and all too often, we hear the same heresies today. We read testimonies of how supposed men of God have direct conversations with God and because we've never had such an experience ourselves we are often left feeling inadequate in our faith. Similarly we are told that unless we've spoken in tongues then the authenticity of our faith is questionable. We rush out and buy the books or attend the conferences to learn what we need to do to achieve the same level of faith in our own lives.

John MacArthur, one of the outstanding and uncompromising teachers of our time, recounts a conversation he once had with a man:

The man said to me, "Sometimes when I'm shaving, Jesus comes in the bathroom and puts His arm around me in the morning and talks to me."  
I said, "You mean the real Jesus?"  
He said yes.

I said, "And He puts His arm around you and you see Him?"

He said yes.

And I just had one question, "Do you keep shaving or do you fall on your face in the ground in terror because you're in the presence of a holy God?"

If you keep shaving, it wasn't Jesus.

He said, "Do you believe that?"

I said, "No, I don't believe it but what's worse, I believe you believe it."

John MacArthur explains, "That's mysticism. It's nothing but you believe it's something."

Paul is equally brutal against these people. In fact, he goes as far to say that their supposed "spiritual" experiences are anything but genuine. He says that their "unspiritual minds puff them up with idle notions". He warns that they have lost connection with the Head; that is, Christ.

On one level the antics of these mystics is harmless, in that they delude themselves with empty and meaningless notions. But on another level their behaviour is deadly because in dragging believers into their mire of nonsense they lead them away from Christ. They encourage believers to worship the gifts rather than the Giver.

Finally, Paul attacks the heresy of asceticism. This is the belief that our perfect union with Christ can somehow become harmed by our interaction with things of the world. Paul says in verses 20 to 23: "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?' These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence."

Of course we must obtain balance with every one of these heresies. For the other extreme of believing that we can live our lives as we please, as if having Christ has made no difference to our lives, and spending no time getting to know the God we claim to love is equally heretical. There remains a very fine line between showing our love for God by honouring Him with our mind, body, and soul and leaning on a false ideal that serves to take us away from a true faith rooted in the sufficiency of Christ. The danger of well intentioned Christians getting caught up in the heresies of rationalism, legalism, mysticism, and asceticism is that we will never be free from guilt and shame. If our relationship with God depended on us achieving any one of these things then we are doomed to fail before we start. But by faith in Christ, our relationship with God is complete from the very first moment we believe. We can add nothing to the redeeming work of Christ found in the power of the cross: through His death and resurrection.

As Paul wrote to the Church in Rome, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.' (Romans 10:9-11)

I would like to finish with a prayer. Let us pray.

Father, in Christ we find the answers to our deepest needs. It is in Him that we are utterly undone and we recognise how far short we fall of Your holiness and majesty. In the light of His presence we see our sin and how we have caused offence in Your sight. Yet it is in Your Son that we find not only complete forgiveness, but reconciliation with You. Apart from Him our best is like filthy rags, but in Christ everything we offer is made perfect. He is our joy, our righteousness, our all in all.

Father, we thank You for the sufficiency that is found in Christ. By the working of Your Spirit help us to be content with Him and to be discontent until we are fully transformed into His image. Help us to seek Him, to know Him, and to be like Him in all that we do and are.

Whilst our heads are still bowed, ask yourself whether you are truly resting, trusting, and living in the sufficiency of Christ. If the answer is yes then praise God for His loving kindness and mercy. If the answer is no, if you've been trusting in human wisdom or religious works, or if you've been seeking the gifts rather than the Giver, or if you thought that some kind of self-denial would earn favour with God, then put it aside and embrace Christ as your Saviour. All that we need and should every seek is found in Him. In faith receive Christ as your all in all.

Amen