

Notes on Colossians

Commentary and Application

Anthony Rea

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is meant to be read with your Bible! Each chapter deals with a portion of Scripture from Colossians and the best way to navigate these pages is using the Bible as your guide. It is my prayer that in doing so your affection for God's Word will grow and you will find yourself in good company with the Berean saints who, "received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily *to find out* whether these things were so." (Acts 17:11, NKJV)

CONTENTS

1	1:1-8	1
2	1:9-14	14
3	1:15-17	30
4	1:18	44
5	1:19-23	54
6	1:24-29	69
7	2:1-10	84
8	2:11-17	98
9	2:18-23	115
10	3:1-11	130
11	3:12-13	146
12	3:14-17	162
13	3:18-19	176
14	3:2-21	191
15	3:22-4:1	204
16	4:2-6	219
17	4:7-18	233
	Bibliography	249
	About the Author	254

CHAPTER 1 | COLOSSIANS 1:1–8

The main point of Paul’s epistle to the Colossians is to underscore the centrality and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. In this way it has been regarded as possibly the most “Christocentric” book in the New Testament.¹

That is a good place for us to start as we begin our introduction to Colossians.

Some scholars believe that because of Paul’s advanced development of Christological themes, he didn’t actually write this letter. The problem with that view is really twofold. First, it ignores the similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. Second, it demands that scholarship hold biblical authors in stasis regarding their writing, arguing that the Apostles could not have matured in their theological understanding by way of the Holy Spirit or further study.

What if we applied the same standard to ourselves? What if we were expected to maintain the same level of spiritual/theological understanding based on one snapshot of our

¹ Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The New American Commentary 32 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 162.

spiritual life? I shudder to think of what madness I would still be espousing in my ignorance.

My prayer is that we will continue to grow in understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ along with the Father and the Spirit as the Lord continues to shape our understanding.

What I propose in regards to Paul's advancement of a more refined Christological understanding is that he, inspired by the Holy Spirit and instructing the church both in that time and ours, received revelation from God through the Scriptures and divine revelation that demonstrate a high view of the person and work of Jesus – more than just a man, God with us.

What would we do without some of the bold assertions of Christ's deity that are found in Colossians, such as the lyrical passage found in Col 1:15–20?

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the

beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased [the Father that] in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross (Col 1:15–20).²

AND –

For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power (Col 2:9–10).

Paul’s presentation of Christ’s Godhood adds to the overwhelming evidence presented in many places in the Scriptures (Isa 9:6; Jer 23:5–6; John 1:1; Rom 9:5; 1 Tim 3:16; Rev 1:5, 8).

Paul’s letter to the Colossians is remarkable exactly *because of* its treatment of Christ. As Paul sets forth this grand theological treatise in the first part of the book, one that apparently is so strong that it challenges theologians, he also presents to the Colossians the practical implications (or the “so what”) of Christ’s Godhood, namely a changed life bearing fruit worthy of Christ’s calling.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture is from the New King James Version (NKJV).

This is one of the letters (along with Romans) that Paul wrote to a fellowship of Christians who were unknown to him personally. This church is believed to have been established by a man mentioned within the epistle, Epaphras.

The town of Colossae was not very significant during this time. It was overshadowed by two larger towns: Laodicea and Hierapolis, which were nearby. Colossae was situated next to the Lycus River and positioned about 120 miles east of that other famous New Testament town, Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey.

While invoking many of the same themes as Ephesians and others of his letters, Paul's letter to the Colossians is unique in several ways.

Along with being uniquely Christ-centered, one source asserts that “many Greek phrases occur here, found nowhere else.”³ These unique terms are academically referred to as *hapax legomena* (“once said”).⁴ Another points out that there are no direct Old Testament scriptural quotations found within the letter.

³ Robert Jamieson, A.R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Colossians*, Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible (1871), 2: 370.

⁴ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 166.

This has led scholars to conclude that what Paul was refuting within the Colossian church was not the “basic Judaism” propagated by what are termed “Judaizers” but what Douglas Moo refers to as a syncretistic amalgamation of “[local] Phrygian folk belief [paganism], local folk Judaism, and Christianity.”⁵

So, then Paul is not confronting strait-laced Judaism in its most direct form but a mish-mash of local customs, beliefs, veneration of angels, ritualistic customs, appeals to spiritual beings, and “various practices to ward off evil.”⁶

It seems to me then that what Paul had heard reported in Colossae fairly represents some aspects of our society today – a mash-up of spiritual or religious beliefs that are grounded more in local folk tradition than in any actual truth.

Paul does much to correct this thinking by refocusing the Colossian saints on the centrality of Jesus Christ.

This would no doubt be a challenge for them but also a joy as they learned to divest themselves of the baggage they had brought along with them, attach themselves to the gospel, and learn to live within the gospel fixed upon Christ alone.

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 57.

⁶ Ibid.

It is within this context that Paul's letter takes shape.

Vv. 1–2 | We begin with Paul's common introduction to the churches.

Although Paul was personally unknown to the Colossians, by this time, he would have had quite a reputation among the churches based on his work for the gospel.

From our perspective, Paul was a champion of the faith, a committed evangelist, a skilled teacher of the Scriptures, and an effective apologist of the freedom found within the gospel. Viewed from the perspective of those outside of the church, Paul may very well have been viewed quite differently, perhaps as a troublemaker, a contrarian, a crazy person, or (likely by the Jews) a heretic.

We find in v. 1 Paul's own assessment of his ministerial calling – “an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” This frames our understanding of Paul's ministry and who exactly is responsible for drafting Paul into the ministry. God is responsible for Paul's Apostolic role, and Christ is the message that Paul bears in his holy office.

We also see in these opening verses that Paul is not a lone ranger. He works alongside others – a point that is further developed toward the close of the letter. In particular, Paul mentions a man named Timothy who is familiar to us from

other portions of Scripture (1 and 2 Tim; Acts 16; 2 Cor 1:19).

BDAG records that Timothy “is named as the ‘co-writer’ of six letters (2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Th 1:1; 2 Th 1:1; Phlm 1).”⁷

This letter is addressed, “To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colossae.”

We must always bear in mind that these letters are written to a believing audience. They are not written with the primary objective of converting unbelievers (though one could argue that perhaps they can serve in that capacity), but they are written specifically to saints, holy ones, those who *are* faithful as the natural result of being made holy by Christ.

These letters inform, instruct, shape understanding, and build up the saints – this holds true in our age as well.

Paul commends to the Colossians that much-needed blessing: grace and peace. We must never lose sight of the sheer immensity of these two gifts.

⁷ William Arndt, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1006.

I was recently speaking with an unbeliever who had never heard of the doctrine of grace – that God’s favor abounds to humanity in our wretchedness. That is the grace of God.

Peace is just as elusive and confused as it ever has been. Peace is that resolved certainty of rest – “a state of concord, peace, harmony.”⁸

Never lose sight of the importance of grace and peace as Paul introduces himself to the saints. And may our hearts be set likewise to extend grace and peace to those we come into contact with.

Vv. 3–8 is one long sentence – in classic Pauline style.

In our endeavor to study the Bible expositively, we must ensure that we don’t “miss the forest for the trees.” It makes sense to take a moment to read through the whole passage so that we grasp the overall idea that Paul is presenting.

The main thrust of this passage is Paul’s gratitude toward God because of the way the gospel impacted the Colossians. Paul’s expression of thanksgiving is rich with theological truth. But even as Paul is expressing his gratitude for their coming to Christ, he is also turning about in his mind how all of this theology works together practically in the real world.

⁸ Arndt, *Lexicon*, 287.

First and foremost, the fruit of the Colossians' conversion has manifested itself in faith in Jesus and love for all the saints (v. 4).

This reminds us of Jesus' instruction to the disciples, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35, NKJV).

Bear in mind that Paul and his companions have not visited Colossae. The reputation that they have earned for loving all the saints is reported abroad – other people have communicated to Paul, and probably others, just how loving this church was.

In Paul's declaration of thanksgiving for the Colossians, we also see this understanding of just how impactful the gospel is. It is the foundation for their conversion, their affection for others, and their fruitfulness as believers.

The spread of the gospel, which Paul describes as moving "in all the world" (v. 6), has found purchase in Colossae and has resulted in a genuine observable change in that community. Of course, that doesn't mean that everything is perfect. As we go on in this letter, Paul has quite a lot to say to ensure that the Colossians stay headed in the right direction, doctrinally speaking, but it is so beautiful to see just how

moved Paul is by the change that they have experienced so far – and all because of Jesus.

That should be our heart, too! Whenever we come upon a newly converted family, a new baby Christian, a recommitted believer, a refugee from the world, we need to take time to give thanks to God for the mighty work that He demonstrates in those moments.

We also need to extend grace, peace, and affection to them and ensure that we communicate just how grateful we are to welcome them into the heavenly family – as they learn to embrace their new heavenly citizenship, their new hope laid up in heaven for them (v. 5).

We need to make sure that we don't automatically jump to the minor controversial topics of the faith – denominationalism, theological trick questions, or any other –isms. While there are portions of Paul's letters that challenge us (God's Word challenges us! We are sinners!), we don't see an overwhelming pattern of Paul "majoring in the minors."

And we don't see that in Colossians. We see his great joy over learning about a body of believers who were united around the fundamental core of our shared faith – the gospel. **And** Paul also indicates that he is aware that coming into contact

with the gospel and being grasped by the gospel will bear fruit in their lives.

There is no indication here that the Colossians were instructed in modifying their behavior or “cleaning themselves up” before embracing the gospel; instead, they embraced the gospel and began to bloom, to unfold beautifully at the Word of the Lord.

And what is it that they **knew**, that they gained knowledge of, that they were influenced by? The grace of God.

Even though Paul was not the planter of this particular church, Epaphras (v. 7) had faithfully communicated the gospel and the grace of God to these people.

Epaphras is described here in positive terms as a servant, a **faithful** servant of Christ who was dedicated to serving the Colossians as he served Jesus. **And**, blessedly, what I think is remarkable about Epaphras, is that what he communicated to Paul and Timothy and their team was just how loving the Colossians were – a love that was unique because of its relation to the Holy Spirit.

Henry Alford writes about this, “This love is emphatically a gift, and in its full reference the chief gift of the Spirit, – as distinct from those unspiritual states of mind which are ἐν

σαρκι ["in the flesh," translation mine]. This love of the Colossians he lays stress on, as grounds for thankfulness, a fruit of the hope laid up for them, – as being that side of their Christian character where he had no fault... to find with them.”⁹

That is a fortuitous place to pause our study – considering their love of the saints. We have been exhorted over and over in our journey with Jesus to love – to love God and to love others, even as we are loved.

Considering the remarkable love demonstrated by the Colossians in the Holy Spirit, the sense we get from the text is that this isn't something we can conjure. Sure, we can (**and do**) fabricate cheap substitutes, papier-mache versions of tenderness and affection that we sometimes keep in reserve for a moment when we need to appear Christian-ly. But we cannot fabricate the ability to love; that is gifted to the saints by the Holy Spirit.

Rather, as we are held by the gospel and moved by the Spirit, love is the result of our pressing into the person and work of Jesus Christ. In some sense, that requires a bit of abandonment on our part, tossing away our cheap imitations of love for the real thing and then – giving it away.

⁹ Henry Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Guardian Press, 1976), 3:199.

This is the result of the gospel – and so we pray, Help us to love, oh Lord, as you love us.

CHAPTER 2 | COLOSSIANS 1:9–14

In the previous verses, Paul sets forth his traditional Apostolic greeting to the church; explains how he and Timothy have come to hear of their conversion, their faith, and their love for the saints; and presents his prayer of thanksgiving for the life-changing work that has been wrought in their lives through the gospel, by a man named Epaphras.

In the portion of Scripture under examination now, we see Paul’s continued prayer turn from thanksgiving to petition. He and Timothy are in constant prayer for these Colossian believers, asking God to work on their behalf – to fill them, enable them to walk worthy of their calling, enable them to be fruitful, and strengthen them for a life of discipleship.

As was the case in verses 3–8, this portion of Scripture (vv. 9–14) is, in the Greek text, a single complex sentence.¹⁰

Interestingly, Douglas Moo has identified a significant number of parallels between these two long sentences, “suggest[ing] that Paul is deliberately echoing the language of... thanksgiving in his petition. The effect is to subtly

¹⁰ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 92.

remind the Colossians again that they must continue on the course they have already begun.”¹¹

In simpler terms, Paul says, “I’m so thankful that you have become Christians; I pray that you would continue becoming Christians.” This intentional echoing of thought reminds us that Paul carefully chose his language to communicate his heart to the churches.

It is remarkably easy for us to be lulled into some distracted, lazy-faced hearing of the Scriptures over time.

We hear the terms pray, filled, knowledge of His will, spiritual understanding, fruitful, Lord, glorious power, patience, longsuffering, joy, kingdom, Son, love, redemption, blood, sins, etc. – so often that we may sometimes feel like we can just collect all of those church words, dump them in a blender, spin it around a few times, empty it onto a page, and recreate an equally edifying (albeit equally boring) message.

Wake up, loved one! Hear the words of the Holy Spirit to the church! Hear the words of the Apostle as he confesses his own personal labor over a group of people he has never even met! Consider what Paul is saying!

¹¹ Ibid.

Paul has already thanked God for making new believers through Jesus, but now he prays earnestly, continually, fervently that these believers might grow! That they might become more! That they might mature into the holiness they are called to.

Too many of us have stalled out along the way. We've heard these same old words preached at us monotonously, and we've failed to grasp the implications. There is a concern for growth in Paul's letters because, in reality, not everyone grows! Not everyone takes root and flourishes (Cf. Matt 3:18–23).

There are so many obstacles along the way (ourselves included) that Paul needs to pray for the growth of the saints. We cannot take for granted the maturity and growth of others in the faith. There is no autopilot!

V. 9 | The first thing that Paul and Timothy ask for (because they prayed together for the saints) is that they would “be **filled** with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.”

What stands out prominently here is this: what Paul and Timothy petition God for, on behalf of the Colossians, is not a responsibility of theirs at all – but God's alone.

Paul doesn't pray that they get their acts together or do any number of Christian-ly things (that is the result of their faith that Paul addresses in the second half of the letter). Instead, he prays that God would fill them by the Spirit so that they might wisely understand His will.

“[W]ith Paul such ‘spiritual’ knowledge is ultimately from (the Spirit of) God. Since the relationship of the Spirit of God to wisdom and understanding is perhaps best interpreted as causative, one may say ‘which God’s Spirit causes you to have.’”¹² The NIV captures the role of the Spirit: “We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives (Col 1:9, NIV).

Who among us can claim a perfectly wise understanding of God’s will? Very few indeed. But we long for that understanding! We want to know what God’s will is!

Understand that Paul isn’t presenting to the church at this time the idea of a personalized will that we so often become infatuated with. Instead, what Paul is indicating to them (and what he will continue to build upon) is the exalted, cosmic

¹² Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 15–16.

will of God that has been revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

That is the gospel! That God dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ and reconciled creation to Himself through the blood of the cross.

That is what changes people – not living your best life on your own terms after identifying that special will and personal allowance to do so. **But** wrestling with the question – since Christ was, is, and is to come; what does that mean for us?

One commentator writes, “What Paul has in mind is not some particular or special direction for one’s life (as we often use the phrase ‘God’s will’), but a deep and abiding understanding of the revelation of Christ and all that he means for the universe (vv. 15–20) and for the Colossians (vv. 21–23).”¹³

¹³ Paul’s use of the compound ἐπιγνώσις in preference to the simple noun γνώσις is taken by some commentators as connoting a special sense of “knowledge”: either, e.g., a more thorough knowledge (Lightfoot, 138) or the direction of the knowledge (MacDonald, 47). However, no consistent difference in meaning between γνώσις and ἐπιγνώσις (or between γινώσκω and ἐπιγινώσκω) can be discovered in Paul, and so we should probably not attach any special nuance to the word here. Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 93.

In a sense, what Paul is doing in vv. 9–14 is building toward the greater theological foundations he will establish in the coming verses.

Practically speaking, what Paul addresses here is precisely where many Christians go off the rails in their own lives, personally and ministerially. They fret over that one big, seemingly all-consuming question, “What is God’s will for **my** life?” And they come away from that question sometimes just as confused as when they began asking it, with no solid answers, no genuine commitments, and no real decision to alter their course, go to the mission field, start evangelizing more, become an apologist, or any of those grand things that we hear of believers doing after wrestling with the question of God’s will.

Many of us have wrestled with the same question but simply continue in our ordinary lives of mediocre discipleship. Eventually, we decide that the question is too big for us after all, and, barring a holy voice from heaven telling us what to do next, we will simply continue as we are.

The problem with all of this is that the question is focused on the wrong person – ourselves. We ask, what does God want to do with **my life**, rather than the far more pressing and important question: what does God want to do with Jesus’ life?

V. 10 | Furthermore, Paul and Timothy together pray that God would help them to “walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

Paul’s language here communicates the idea of living: “As the Lord wants,” or that they should have “the kind of life which the Lord expects of you.” Yet another feasible translation reads, “your lives ... may bring credit to your master’s name.”¹⁴

Well, how does one know if they are walking in a way that is pleasing to the Lord, that brings credit to His name? The answer is found in the text.

First, bearing fruit and, second, increasing in the knowledge of God. We shall take each in turn.

Remember this – bearing good fruit, good works, loving others, caring for others, etc., are not the door by which we access the gospel. Those things are the result of the gospel. The gospel stands on its own; it is either accepted or rejected on its own terms, and the fruit that follows is an indicator of what has occurred in the life of the hearer.

¹⁴ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 16.

Jesus taught during the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:15–20) about how the nature of the fruit on a tree’s branches reveals the type of tree – good or bad.

Contextually, Jesus was teaching the audience about identifying false teachers – that is a timely message. Don’t just listen to the words of the teachers but observe the fruit of their lives.

Jesus taught them:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor [can] a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them (Matt 7:15–20).

We all say amen, and we thank Jesus for giving us such practical advice for discerning the hearts of those wolves among us.

But... what if we are the wolves!? What fruit are we bearing? Have we been “filled with the knowledge of His will” and changed so that we are no longer thorn bushes? Have we

been transformed into something good that benefits others – like the fig tree?

Paul prayed that would be the case for the Colossians. And I pray so! Only time will tell.

The second mark of walking worthy of our Lord Jesus is increasing in the knowledge of God. This is, arguably, one of the fruits produced in our lives **and also is the cause of our fruitfulness.**

The more we grow to know God, the more He has His way with us – that is, when we begin to understand His will and His ways. That is when we are at our most fruitful.

The question, then, must be asked: How do we increase our knowledge of God? Spend time with Him. That is the only way we truly get to know others, by spending time with them.

V. 11 | Paul prays that in their transformative moments with God, they would be “strengthened... according to His glorious power.” This refocuses the reader upon the source of strength.

The Colossians aren’t responsible for strengthening themselves. The original language indicates to us that it is God who “cause[s] someone to have the ability to do or to

experience something – ‘to make someone able, to give capability to, to enable, to strengthen, to empower.’”¹⁵

We must anchor our understanding regarding the source of this strength outside of ourselves. It is according to His, that is God’s glorious power.

This isn’t something we are capable of doing on our own. This strengthening is spiritual in nature and intended to equip the saints for that long walk with Jesus, resulting in patience and longsuffering.

These two – patience and longsuffering – are characteristics that we need to revisit in our understanding of how the will of God, born out through the gospel, bears fruit in our lives.

The term that Paul uses for “patience” (ὑπομονή, *hypomone*) indicates “the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty, patience, endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, perseverance.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 675.

¹⁶ Arndt, *Lexicon*, 1039.

The term employed for “longsuffering” (μακροθυμία, *makrothymia*) indicates a “state of remaining tranquil while awaiting an outcome, patience, steadfastness, endurance.”¹⁷

These much-desired characteristics result from being strengthened by God as we grow in our knowledge of who He is, which is quite beautiful. The God of all creation is active in the lives of His people, with very real results in our lives. He is closer to us than some distant, unapproachable being. He is near to us.

He knows us and desires that we should know Him.

As we grow to know Him and learn about Him, we also grow in these areas too – patience, longsuffering, and **joy!**

Joy is an interesting companion to patience and longsuffering. So often, we find ourselves demonstrating our own version of patience through gritted teeth and fake smiles. The patience of the faithful is found with joy; that is a challenging saying.

V. 12 | The patience of the faithful is also found with thanksgiving! Another challenging saying!

¹⁷ Ibid, 612.

Patience and longsuffering, gifted by God according to His glorious power, are given to us for a purpose. These attributes are not necessarily required in an existence with zero friction where things are going swimmingly. Nevertheless, we live in a broken world and find that these rare treasures of patience and longsuffering are called upon more than we would perhaps like.

In all of that, we are a people of thanksgiving – thanking God for what He has allowed us to participate in: “the inheritance of the saints in the light.”

“We are reminded again, for a third time, of who the agent of this gift is ... the Father. He is the one who has qualified us.”¹⁸ In our original state, we are unqualified for that heavenly citizenship, inadequate in and of our own devisings. But the Father makes us adequate by His own initiative. How?

Here in vv. 12–14, Paul begins to narrow the focus of his writing. Until now, Paul has been describing the impact of the gospel on the Colossians; he now lays out for them the bare facts of the gospel.

Vv. 13–14 | Paul presents to the Colossians the before and after of their interaction with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 205.

Interestingly, he uses first-person plural language – “He has delivered us.”

Paul isn’t standing outside of the gospel. He isn’t like one who is grandfathered into the kingdom, preaching clever platitudes and spiritual-sounding language to affect change in the church – he is a part of the redeemed.

Their previous state, our previous state, saw us as subject to “the power of darkness.” That means under the authority of darkness.¹⁹ That’s intense! The concept of this authority is so strong that the theological force behind it communicates “a supernatural power having some particular role in controlling the destiny and activities of human beings – ‘power, authority, lordship, ruler, wicked force.’”²⁰

These are the things that good reasonable Christians like to bury and not talk about too openly for fear of being considered crazy –that the whole of humankind apart from Jesus dwells under the authority of darkness, a wicked force, evil, Satan (Cf. John 8:44; Eph 2:2–3; 1 John 5:19).

¹⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 77.

²⁰ Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 146–147.

Paul's contrast here of darkness to light, though familiar to us, "forcefully portrays the gracious initiative and independent activity of God, the impotence and helplessness of man, and the contrast between the two modes of existence."²¹

Gloriously, we have been moved, all at once, into Christ's kingdom. We are no longer subject to the darkness. We are, as Paul writes in Ephesians, "children of light" (Eph 5:8).

James Dunn reflects upon this verse, writing, "There is nothing quite like this claim that believers in Christ Jesus have already ... been transferred into the kingdom, like a whole people transported from their traditional territory to settle in a new region."²²

More than just moving, more than just trading in our old wretched citizenship for a heavenly one, more than just being translated from darkness to light, **we have redemption through the blood of Jesus.**

²¹ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 19.

²² Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 77.

Where we were once slaves to sin, slaves in that dark land of spiritual wickedness, we have been purchased by the blood of Jesus.²³ The righteous for the unrighteous.

This is the gospel. This is how Paul begins his discourse with the Colossians – acknowledging the work that God has accomplished in their lives through Christ; praying earnestly for their continued progress through the road marked with suffering, where much patience and strength is required; and reminding them of their blessed hope, reminding them of that dark kingdom they came from, reminding them of the good message – “we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.”

You’ve heard this message before. But it bears repeating because so often we turn the gospel into so many other things – do this, don’t do that, say this, don’t say that, etc. But at the end of the day, the bold truth, the gift extended to dark, crooked souls, is that forgiveness is near by the blood of Christ and that He desires to snatch those dark, crooked souls (a crowd we are all too familiar with ourselves) into His kingdom of light.

²³ The terminology used (ἀπολύτρωσις, *apolytrosis*) indicates, “‘buying back’ a slave or captive, i.e., ‘making free’ by payment of a ransom (λύτρον, q.v.; prisoners of war could ordinarily face slavery).” Arndt, *Lexicon*, 117.

See here, too, is the coalescence of the Trinity: we are filled with the knowledge of His will **by the Spirit (v. 10)**; we are qualified for our eternal inheritance by the divine initiative of **the Father (v. 12)**; and we are redeemed through the blood of **the Son (v. 13)**.

All three, as one, serve as the agent to move us onward into the kingdom. Come into contact with the living God – Father, Son, and Spirit. All praise to God that you have become His saints; all prayers to God that you would continue becoming His saints. Amen.

CHAPTER 3 | COLOSSIANS 1:15–17

Up to this point, Paul has thanked God for the faith and love of the Colossian church (vv. 3–8), has prayed for their continued participation and growth in the gospel (vv. 9–11), and has reminded them of the bare facts of the gospel (vv. 11–14), namely that “[W]e have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.”

The tone of the letter now ascends as Paul presents to the church a hymn of exaltation about the Messiah, Jesus.²⁴

That such bold assertions of Christ’s deity were likely already captured in hymnal form indicates to us that the core idea that Jesus Christ is God was not a new development brought about by twisting the text over time, as some suggest. Rather, the core belief in Christ’s Godhood, which we call His deity, has existed foundationally as part of the church since its very beginning.

While we may take that statement – Jesus Christ is God – for granted in our time, that wasn’t always the case. And certain heretical groups still don’t recognize the deity of Christ!

²⁴ “It is generally agreed that at this point the writer(s) have included an already formed hymn.” Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 83.

This is a form of a very ancient heresy that began to grow in popularity in the 4th century AD known as Arianism (so named because it was championed by a man named Arius).

[T]his heresy maintained that God the Father alone is eternal and made His Son to be the first creature He created *ex nihilo* [from nothing]. Some Arians went on to teach that the Holy Spirit was the first and greatest creature produced by the Son. The Council of Nicea met in a.d. 325 to deal with the subject, and it firmly rejected Arianism. It held that the Son was of the same substance with the Father... not merely of similar substance... pronouncing [as] its Scriptural faith that the Son was ***'Son of God, light of light, very God of very God, being of one substance with the Father'*** (emphasis mine).²⁵

Another source goes on to note that:

The Arian system was a refined form of paganism, and substituted a created demigod for the eternal uncreated *Logos* [Word]; it degraded Christianity to a merely relative value; it separated God and the world by an impassable gulf, and made...real reconciliation and atonement impossible... its irresistible tendency is downward to... Unitarianism, and Rationalism, until th[is] untenable

²⁵ Alan Cairns, *Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador Emerald International, 2002), 40.

conception... gives way to the idea of Christ as a mere man.²⁶

So then, while Arius proposed and advanced his dangerous theology more than three hundred years after the Apostle Paul instructed the churches, we find that the first churches were locally codifying the important doctrines of the faith in ways that were easily communicated to the Body – for instance, this very hymn found in vv. 15–20.

Hymns are important to the church not just because of their aesthetic value, setting the mood, and preparing our hearts for worship (even as we worship in the hymn itself) but because of the message that songs communicate to us in such a “sticky” fashion!

Martin Luther’s view on songs was such: “Music is a fair and lovely gift of God which has often wakened and moved me to the joy of preaching.... Next after theology, I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor.... My heart bubbles up and overflows in response to music, which has so often refreshed me and delivered me from dire plagues.”²⁷

²⁶ Philip Schaff, “Arianism,” *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*, ed. William Smith and Henry Wace (London: John Murray, 1877–1887), 155–156.

²⁷ Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 878.

While we're on the topic of hymns and singing, D.L. Moody used this humorous illustration in his preaching:

There was a Wesleyan preacher in England... a most godly man. He was once preaching from the text: "And They Sang a New Song," and he said:

"Yes, there will be singing in heaven, and when I get there, I will want to have David with his harp, and Paul, and Peter and other saints gather around for a sing. And I will announce a hymn from the Wesleyan Hymnal. 'Let us sing hymn No. 749—' My God, my Father, while I stray —"

But someone will say, "That won't do. You are in heaven,... there's no straying here." And I will say, "Yes, that's so. Let us sing No. 651—"

Though waves and storms go o'er my head,
Though friends be gone and hopes be dead—

But another saint will interrupt, "... you forget you are in heaven now; there are no storms here." "Well, I will try again, No. 536—"

Into a world of ruffians sent—

“... someone will say, ‘We will put you out unless you stop giving out inappropriate hymns.’ I will ask—what can we sing?”

And they will all say:

“Sing the new song, the song of Moses and the Lamb.”²⁸

To add my own addendum to Moody’s illustration, I would suggest that we will, in full confidence, also be able to sing this hymn from Colossians, the hymn of the exalted Christ, when we reach that longed-for heavenly kingdom.

A late 17th, early 18th-century Scottish politician named Andrew Fletcher demonstrated his understanding of the power of song on the hearts of people when he conveyed the thought, “[I]f a man were permitted to make all the ballads he need not care who should make the laws of a nation... we find that most of the ancient legislators thought that they could not well reform the manners of any city without the help of a lyric, and sometimes of a dramatic poet.”

This sentiment has a bearing on our understanding of Paul’s hymn here in the text. As moved by the Holy Spirit, Paul presented to the Colossian church this song, which they

²⁸ D. L. Moody, *Anecdotes, Incidents, and Illustrations* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell, 1898), 7.

urgently needed to get stuck in their brains and hearts, to maintain their onward progress with Christ.

The song, the truth, they needed to get stuck in their hearts was that song declaring exactly **who** Jesus **is!**

Paul's bold instruction concerning the deity of Christ would certainly be contrary to any form of pagan folk religion or local Judaism the Colossians were resisting. It would refocus the Christians in Colossae on the sole source of creation as they knew it – Jesus Christ, God with us.

The religion they had received as Gentile pagans would have been fraught with tall tales, legends, and myths about creation. It included a pantheon of little 'g' gods and goddesses who were often mischievous, self-serving, and irrational in their relationships with mankind. Whether or not one attributes belief in these ancient deities to demonic powers of darkness or to the imagination of mankind, it makes no difference.

The true and living God over all creation is inextricably bound up in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus doesn't just get a piece of the pie, as those ancient Greco-Roman deities did in their lore (sun, sea, love, war, etc.). He created the whole thing, for all creation moves to the sound of His voice and at His good pleasure.

This is the central thought that Paul communicates to the church, and it is a thought that we dare not stray from – Christ is the center of all.

Furthermore, we must pay special attention to this portion of Scripture because “the language and concepts of the passage are picked up throughout the rest of the letter.”²⁹ Paul is going to build upon this solid foundation (Cf. 1 Cor 3:11) as he demonstrates to them the results of Christ’s deity.

So, let us examine who Jesus is, acknowledging Henry Alford’s work on the subject, who wrote that “the following description applies to Christ’s whole Person in its essential glory.”³⁰

V. 15 | “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”

How can one be the image of something invisible? That is mystifying! That core truth defies our clever attempts to describe the essence of the visible incarnate Christ as being one with the Father. Nevertheless, Jesus **is** exactly that. He fully embodies all of the characteristics of the invisible God – they are, after all, of the same substance.

²⁹ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 109.

³⁰ Alford, *Greek Testament*, 202.

Furthermore, Christ is the firstborn over all creation. This terminology gives people fits at times because they want to interpret this in its strictest, wooden sense. But let us use a bit of good sense in approaching our interpretation. We have already concluded that Paul's language here is either an excerpt from an early Christian hymn or a hymn that he penned himself.³¹

So, when we are considering lyrical writing, hymns, songs, psalms, etc., should we concentrate our interpretation on the most formal equivalent language, or should we delve beneath the surface and attempt to capture the thought behind the lyrics?

If the author is using a figurative manner of speaking, then perhaps we ought to adopt a figurative interpretation – or else we are lost!

This is exactly what happens to people who don't see Christ as God. They point to such a verse as this and say, see – he's not God, he was born! Nonsense! That ignores the heart of Paul's message and the remainder of the associated description of who Christ **is!**

³¹ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 108–109 and Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 84–85.

Paul is using elevated, exalted language, and so his message should be understood as such. It is here that we must place ourselves in the student's seat and learn from those who have wrestled with this language before us, to consider the whole of Scripture carefully, the intention of God's will (Cf. Col 1:9–10), and the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Word incarnate who was in the beginning, the Word made flesh, and the One who lives forevermore.

“The figurative meaning of *πρωτότοκος* (*firstborn*) in the messianic title *πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως* ‘firstborn of all creation’ (Col 1:15) may be interpreted as ‘existing before all creation’... or ‘existing superior to all creation.’”³² This term also carries the weight of “existing superior to all else of the same or related class—‘superior to, above all.’... ‘existing superior to all creation’ Col 1:15.”³³

So then, as Alford proposes, “The safe method of interpretation therefore will be, to take into account the two ideas manifestly included in the word, and here distinctly referred to—*priority*, and *dignity*” (emphasis mine).³⁴

V. 16 lays out for us the Son's relationship to all creation.

³² Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 116.

³³ Ibid, 737.

³⁴ Alford, *Alford's Greek Testament*, 203.

This shatters the errant perspective that Jesus of Nazareth was merely a man, a wise teacher, born into the world like all of us, but someone who lived an exceptional life.

By him – all things were created. Jesus Christ played an active role in creation, and He still carries out that creative role as He makes new lives and new creations by His word (Cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).

There is nothing in existence that was brought forth outside of His divine prerogative. He is equally Creator with the Father and the Spirit.

As John writes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:1–3).

And Paul writes to the Romans: “For of Him and through Him and to Him [are] all things, to whom [be] glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36).

Christ’s role in creation attests to His deity, as it is written, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1).

He created all things – that includes world powers, governments, nations, as well as the stars of the sky, the tides,

the oceans, and all life; it includes the invisible spiritual realm around us and the heavenly realm which we shall see in time. All means **all**.

V. 17 | Jesus Christ our Lord is before all things – that includes all time. He is the eternal one with the Father. Remember that the

Hebrew word for God, *YHWH*, holds within its range of meaning, “the existing One.” Quite simply, “Christ existed before anything else existed” or “before anything was created.”³⁵

To counter those aberrant thinkers who declare, “Christ never claimed He was God,” let me remind you of John 8:58: “Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.’” In this declaration, Jesus applies to Himself the name that God declared of Himself as, “My name forever, and... My memorial to all generations,” the great I AM, the existing one (Cf. Ex 3:14–15).

This “before-ness” of Jesus also includes the idea of preeminence that has already been established by right of His divine personhood. He is “at the head of the line,” as it were, before all creation.

³⁵ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 25.

More than just being first and before all things, simultaneously, all things are bound up in Jesus.

Bratcher and Nida offer a helpful solution to conveying this thought, writing, “[E]verything fits together because of Christ... Christ is the one who causes everything to fit together.” In some languages, the concept of “fitting together” is related to the construction of furniture, so that a phrase such as “everything remains in its place” may be appropriate or “everything is dovetailed together,” in which the strongest and most effective joint in carpentry is identified by “dovetailing.”³⁶

This is so important! All things are held together by Jesus Christ, in accord with the Father and the Spirit. Never forget that! Creation doesn't keep spinning on because of our own willpower and desire! Creation continues on its course because of Christ's willpower and desire! Because He is still working, still forming, reforming, converting, saving, creating, holding all things together in Himself.³⁷ “What holds the universe together is not an idea or a virtue, but a person: the resurrected Christ. Without him, electrons would not continue to circle nuclei, gravity would cease to work, the planets would not stay in their orbits.... Paul wants them to

³⁶ Ibid, 25.

³⁷ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 220.

understand that things make sense only when Christ is kept at the center.”³⁸

Does this blow your mind? I hope so. I hope it reorients us on **who Jesus is!**

All too often, we find ourselves sliding ever so slightly into the camp of Arius, forgetting that our Lord is God – who is to be revered with the most profound awe and respect.

Honestly, my brain can hardly reconcile the idea that the Almighty Creator of all things, who exists before all time and holds the first office above all creation, lowered Himself and made Himself our friend, our servant.

How did He not just wipe everything out during His earthly ministry? How did He manage such restraint? Only by His very nature – His perfect Godhood.

What’s amazing is that One so powerful cares to call us His own.

That we find our lives positioned not only within His kingdom but within His very person. Don’t you see how that is **perfect** reconciliation?

³⁸ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 125–126.

Christ doesn't save His people by half measure. He doesn't simply move us from one set of beliefs and behaviors to another, or even to a better set of beliefs and behaviors. He doesn't bring His creation only halfway home. He gathers us to Himself, to be found in Him completely. Because He is God, He brings us all the way, and He will keep us by His strong hand.

CHAPTER 4 | COLOSSIANS 1:18

In our previous study of Colossians 1:15–20, we noted that Paul sets forth a hymn of exaltation about Christ – who He is and what His relationship is to the Father and all creation. This hymn soars with declarations of Christ’s position over and above all things both in time (He is eternal) and dignity (He is God). It presents Christ as God with us, over us, above us, and for us.

As we continue with the second half of this glorious hymn, we will see further **who** Jesus Christ is as we continue to examine His personal attributes.

V. 18 begins with the conjunction “and” (καί). This small word has a significant impact on how we understand Jesus.

The common danger facing many of us is that we often like to present or view Jesus as *only, simply, merely* one type of person.

We’ve all seen this. We’ve all done this. Having looked at the gospel accounts and even pouring over Scriptures to understand who Jesus is, we come away with one thing that we really latch on to. Normally, this is one characteristic of

Jesus that means a lot to us individually because it addresses a specific felt need in our own lives, and that is really special because Jesus meets us right where we are, in our need, through the Scriptures – it’s beautiful.

But we need to ensure that we are approaching Jesus and presenting Jesus as the Scriptures declare Him. So, we need to make sure that we take whichever attribute of Jesus that we find ourselves meditating on – love, mercy, compassion, holiness, goodness, justice, grace, etc. – (often considered singularly because there is so much to consider on each attribute!) and we need to add the conjunction “and” to that.

Jesus is gracious **and** ...

Jesus is loving **and** ...

Jesus is holy **AND** ... etc.

That’s what Paul does here. He presents Jesus in high definition, declaring many aspects of His personhood to be considered and exalted.

Jesus Christ holds the first place over all creation, **and** all things are made through Him and for Him and are held together by Him, **and He is the Head of the church!**

We must take this to heart. Jesus Christ is not some distant being who is only concerned with everything else in creation and doesn't have any time for the holy institution that He is building and that is foundationally held together by Him (Cf. Matt 16:18; Eph 2:19–20).

More so, the recognition of Christ's headship over the church should really reinforce our understanding of the importance of the church (understood as the church universal, expressed locally)!

We live in an age where "church" is sometimes considered a dirty word. People balk at the idea of "organized religion" and love to quote the father of communism, Karl Marx, while describing religion as "the opium of the people."

Sadly, many "christians" have joined those ranks too; they reject the holy church that Jesus is building and degrade, deface, undermine, and subvert the holy purpose of the corporate body of believers unified in Christ.

As James Dunn writes, "To assert that Christ is head of the church does not narrow his cosmic mediatorial role; rather, it expands the significance of the claims made for the church."³⁹

³⁹ Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 96.

Here's the bottom line: you can't have Jesus without the church –the two are inextricably tied to one another – they are the same body.

Now, that truth stops the discussion on and the very valid criticisms against fraudulent organizations that are only masquerading as churches – wolves in sheep's clothing.

But here we find plainly the idea that Christ and the church go together. The church is the Body of Christ. He is the head, and the saints are the members who compose the Body.

Moreover, Christ alone is the head of the church, “not any angels nor created beings.”⁴⁰ Not any other saint, not any other governing board or body. That is a point that Paul is going to continue to make throughout this letter, given the apparent propensity for the Colossians to spend a lot of theological effort and energy considering angelic beings and that sort of thing (Cf. Col 2:18; Heb 1:6).

Since Christ is preeminent over all things and since He is the beginning, how much more seriously should we take our own roles in His body?

In this context, the church of Jesus Christ takes on a cosmic role characterized by the agency of Christ. Being before all

⁴⁰ Alford, *Greek Testament*, 204.

things in dignity and time and treading the first path through the resurrection from the dead, Christ moves His holy Body toward action, far more action than a brief gathering of like-minded individuals to drink coffee together!

Do you see the majesty of Jesus expressed through the church?

The One that we desire to magnify in every imaginable way through all of our endeavors, the One we are focused upon in our gathering together, the One we are propelled by as we go about making disciples is the One who declared, “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, [the] Beginning and [the] End,’ says the Lord, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’” (Rev 1:8).

This church thing that we have a hard time fully understanding (and that many profess to have a better understanding of than they actually do) **is a big deal!**

I would invite those who view the church through any one of the transactional lenses that we’ve used to portray the “church” in very one-dimensional terms (community, outreach, inreach, service, Bible teaching, missions, etc.) to reorient themselves on the head of the church (the heartbeat of the church – the life of the church – Jesus Christ) and the

flesh and bones of the church (Jesus in each of us, knit together by His love and the Holy Spirit).

Yes, the church should display many of those marks above, but, as with Christ, the church isn't **only** that. How could it be? Christ is far more than just one flat note plucked on an irrelevant guitar. So then, His body, the church, is far more than a group of people addicted to an ancient religion who gather together once or twice a week to affirm one another's moral rightness.

I suggest that the church, the Body of Christ, ought to be far more than we have become accustomed to, as we remain connected to Christ, the Head. In simpler terms: **who** Jesus is with all His aspects ought to impact and drive who we are as a body.

And Jesus is the beginning. Henry Alford comments that the following terms present Christ as “the beginning.. of the Church of the First-born, being Himself πρωτότ. ἐκ τ. Νεκρ ... [the firstborn from the dead] cf. ἀπαρχὴ χριστός, 1 Cor. 15:23.”⁴¹

Do you know what that means? We, part of the Body, are part of a resurrection community – the church of resurrected

⁴¹ Alford, *Greek Testament*, 205.

ones, belonging to and established by the first and final resurrected One.

As the author of Hebrew writes: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, ²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn [who are] registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect” (Heb 12:22–23).

The resurrection (in the superlative sense) is an event uniquely tied to the identity of who Jesus is. This is the Christ of our faith, the resurrected One.

The Apostle John refers to Jesus as “the firstborn from the dead” in Rev 1:5. Paul further refers to Christ as the “firstfruits” from the dead in 1 Cor 15:23.

The resurrection was the thing that changed Paul’s life – from a fierce persecutor of the church to its staunchest champion in the first century. Seeing the resurrected Christ and hearing the gospel provoked Paul to begin thinking through what the resurrection meant for this new kingdom of believers.

Paul publicly proclaimed his experience with the resurrected Jesus while on trial for his faith: “Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the

prophets and Moses said would come—that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22–23).

The implications of Paul’s language not only here but in the rest of the NT (Acts 26:23, Rom 8:29, 1 Cor 15), that Christ is the firstborn from the dead, indicates to us that there will be others to follow!

This is our blessed hope – that we don’t just follow a dead man as many world religions do. That we don’t just follow a human, as many world religions do. That we don’t just get our reward on this earth, as many world religions do. That the person whom we follow is, as God, conqueror of death by virtue of His own preeminence. And He proved His supremacy through conquering death.

That is the great hope of mankind – that the resurrected One has established a new way ahead. Before Christ’s resurrection, the ultimate end for all creation was death. All mankind, under the curse, was doomed to die (Gen 3:19).

But, when God with us, Jesus, returned to life in the garden tomb, defeating His wounds, defeating death itself, He established an eternal hope.

James Dunn writes about this portion of Scripture that “it nicely encapsulates what appears to have been the earliest Christian understanding, namely that with Christ’s resurrection the end-time resurrection itself had begun.... The sense of a new beginning for creation could hardly be clearer, that with Christ’s death and resurrection what had been expected as the end of all things and renewal of creation in a new age was already operative in and through this same Christ.”⁴²

This is the church – the resurrection community, one Body, under the Lordship of the God-Man, Jesus Christ, the one who defeated death by His resurrection and brings life to those He calls His own flesh and bone (Cf. Eph 5:30).

Matthew Henry presents an elegant meditation on this thought of how we as the church are wrapped up in the resurrection of Christ: “All our hopes and joys take their rise from him who is the author of our salvation. Not that he was the first who ever rose from the dead, but the first and only one who rose by his own power, and was declared to be the Son of God, and Lord of all things. And he is the head of

⁴² Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 98.

the resurrection, and has given us an example and evidence of our resurrection from the dead.”⁴³ Amen.

⁴³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 2331.

CHAPTER 5 | COLOSSIANS 1:19–23

Until now, we have been examining Paul’s hymn of exaltation to Christ found in verses 15–20. We continue in that endeavor now.

The preceding verses declare Christ’s preeminent authority, His creative force, His unmatched dignity, His relationship with the church, and His resurrection power.

We now take a look at the “**how**” and “**why**” of it all. How could a man who lived, breathed, and walked upon planet earth – not simply in the imaginations of mankind – possibly be involved in all of those cosmic events? And what is the purpose?

V. 19 | Jesus Christ is **fully God** in agreement with the divine prerogative of the Father.

Douglas Moo suggests, “We might paraphrase, ‘God in all his fullness has chosen to dwell in Christ.’”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 132.

Here we are presented with some measure of how the triune God relates to Himself. We get a partial view of the doctrine of the Trinity.

For those who reject the idea of the Trinity on the flimsy ground that the word “trinity” is not found in the text, let it be understood that the term itself is important only insofar as it succinctly communicates to us the trinitarian concepts that are so plainly presented throughout Scripture.⁴⁵

What we see through a careful examination of Scripture is that the Father, Son, and Spirit are equal, substantially the same, and unified (Gen 1:26, 3:22; Isa 6:8; Psa 110:1; Matt 3:16–17, 22:41–46, 28:19; 1 Cor 12:4–6; Eph 4:4–6; Heb 1:8; Jude 20–21).⁴⁶

How exactly that works out is one of the divine mysteries of our faith. We need to be careful to avoid over-explaining or over-simplifying the Trinity because our best attempts at describing the Trinity often wander unwittingly into heretical territory as we fail to maintain the proper measure of consistency or theological soundness in order to make our clever illustrations work.

⁴⁵ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 226–257.

In simple terms, all that God is, Christ is, was, and shall be forevermore, amen.

But understand, a man did not ascend to Godhood – that is to say, that Christ did not become God, but rather God became a man. That is an essential truth to understand. The other way around presents a works-based theology and even presents the false idea that any person can achieve deification (as in Buddhism, Mormonism, etc.) if they would just try hard enough and live good enough.

We know from Scripture that God became man. He emptied and humbled Himself to become like us, to share in our weakness, to be tempted as we are tempted. (Luke 1:28–35; Phil 2:5–6; Heb 4:15, 5:2)

It was God’s will to be the Christ, the Messiah, the promised One – and by that to guarantee reconciliation in and through Himself. It has been said, “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” God did that!

V. 20 | He is the one who is responsible for reconciliation – making wrong things right.

The scope of reconciliation through Christ is vast and encompasses **all things** – whether on earth or in heaven.

Paul's description of the earthly and heavenly realms reinforces an idea that he has already shared with the Colossians (v. 16) – the notion of visible and invisible realms and that Christ is over all creation, not just a limited portion.

There are, in fact, other forces at work in creation that are invisible to us, and as indicated here, both the visible and invisible realms are in need of reconciliation. Both have been “touched” by sin.⁴⁷ Both have been damaged in some way that requires repair.

How does God repair the breach in creation? The blood of Christ's cross.

That answer seems simple enough to most believers. But how exactly does it work? How is the cross effective as a means of reconciliation since many had died upon a cross prior to Jesus, and many afterward? It was so common and despised. How is it that something so shameful should be the tool God uses to bring about peace?

Martin Hengel writes:

The excessive use made of crucifixion by the Romans in the pacification of Judaea meant that from the beginning of direct Roman rule crucifixion was taboo as a form of

⁴⁷ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 225.

the Jewish death penalty... the death of Jesus on the cross is very much more than a religious symbol... it is more than just an ethical model which calls for discipleship, though it is all this as well. What we have here is God's communication of himself, the free action through which he establishes the effective basis of our salvation. In ancient thought... an ethical and symbolic interpretation of the crucifixion was still possible, but to assert that God himself accepted death in the form of a crucified Jewish manual worker from Galilee in order to break the power of death and bring salvation to all men could only seem folly and madness to men of ancient times.⁴⁸

We must take a moment to consider the message of the cross. We must grasp this! After two millennia, the theology of the cross that we present sometimes appears as bright, shining glory in and of itself, but what Paul is presenting to the Colossians is the idea that God took something common and shameful in the eyes of the world and, by that, made peace.

This is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of our faith: the message of the cross.

⁴⁸ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 85, 89.

Is it any wonder then that Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1Co 1:18).

Gayle Erwin puts the cross into context when he writes:

The cross was never foolishness to me. I saw it everywhere. It gracefully adorned lofty steeples. In polished silver or burnished wood, it decorated the interiors of churches and other religious buildings. It hung in expensive jewelry around elegant necks. It graced the lapels of suits and marked the fancy stationery of big churches. It was sung about and proclaimed. People carried huge and heavy crosses for penance or publicity. The cross permeated my world.

But it was never foolishness. How could that be?

Then it occurred to me that I didn't truly understand the cross, primarily because people don't die on crosses in these days. Had Jesus come to this age, we would have treated him far more humanely. We would have electrocuted him or hanged him or gassed him or placed him before the firing squad or at least injected him with a lethal dose of drugs.

Imagine the results of such a modern execution. I would now be collaring people on the streets and witnessing in this manner: “Neighbor, my best friend just died in the electric chair for you. If you will believe this and take up your electric chair and follow him, you will be saved.”⁴⁹

The message of the cross certainly appears to be foolishness to those who are perishing!

To the first-century mind, the cross was anything but peace, wisdom, or blessed assurance. Instead, it was an instrument of torture and humiliation.

It **must** be the power of God that takes the shameful cross and makes it His instrument of peace. But peace for whom?

Vv. 21–22 | In Paul’s letter, he is, of course, addressing the Colossian Christians, but the peace that God has made through the cross is felt and declared across time and space, extending even to us.

Remember that God has reconciled **all creation** through the cross! This is a promise for our age, too.

Paul describes the Colossians as being at one time **alienated** from God. This means that they were estranged from God,

⁴⁹ Gayle Erwin, *The Jesus Style* (Cathedral City, CA: Yahshua Publishing, 2011), np.

separated. They were foreign to God, and God was foreign to them.⁵⁰

Moreover, they were **God's enemies**. This is quite a harsh accusation. Paul categorizes the human condition, before being reconciled to Christ, as one of hostility.

What we see is that in our own self-governed state, without Christ, we are counted as hostile toward God. This flies in the face of modern thinking (or even ancient thinking), which proposes that one may be agnostic – neither aligned with God nor opposed to Him – that one may be uninterested neither for nor against.

That is simply not the case. There is no fence to sit on when it comes to man's standing before the living God. Either we are His, won to Him by the cross, or we are His enemies.

Now, that truth has led to some pretty terrible behavior on the part of Christians. When we discover that the world is divided along these lines, we sometimes feel compelled to assault God's enemies – as if He needs us to conquer for Him! In those moments, we would do well to remember Jesus' words to a feisty Peter who sought to defend his Lord by force: "But Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword in its place,

⁵⁰ Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 132.

for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt 26:52).

And we should take our cues on how we are to behave from Christ’s example. Even though we (they) were enemies and strangers, **yet He has reconciled us to Himself** and has made **peace**.

The ministry of the gospel is not one of assault but reconciliation. Paul writes about this to the Corinthians:

Therefore, if anyone [is] in Christ, [he is] a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things [are] of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:17–19).

So then, wherever God’s people are found propagating or instigating conflict among humanity, where it is God’s express will that we should be messengers of reconciliation and peace, we are found to be out of alignment with God’s will and God’s Word.

We are to be people who, by the grace of Christ and the Holy Spirit, are endeavoring to bring the gospel to bear in such a way that damaged lives, touched by sin, are made right in Jesus' name.

One of the early church fathers, John Chrysostom, wrote: “When thou art minded to war against thy brother, bethink thee that thou warrest against the members of Christ, and cease from thy madness. For what if he be an outcast? What if he be vile? What if he be open to contempt? So saith He [Christ], ‘It is not the will of My Father that one of these little ones should perish’ (Matt. 18:14).”⁵¹

And all of that centers around the message of the cross. When we lose the focus of the cross, we lose the focus of the gospel, the focus of the Apostles' doctrine, and the focus of Scripture.

Remember Paul's words:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the

⁵¹ John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Colossians,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. Ashworth and John Albert Broadus, vol. 13, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 273.

testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you *except Jesus Christ and Him crucified*. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching [were] not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Co 2:1–5, emphasis mine).

“Jesus Christ and Him crucified” is the center of our message – by the cross, by the blood of Jesus, people may be reconciled to God. They may have their relationship with Him restored. They may be granted that abiding peace that so many people long for.

The cross was the countertop on which the transaction for men’s souls took place. Our debt has been paid. Our accounts cleared and reconciled with God.

The result of that reconciliation **is peace**. Now we must consider the notion of peace – what is that all about?

Richard Melick writes, “The peace achieved through the death of Jesus is an objective peace. It is the peace of relationships, not feelings. Although the human heart cries for feelings of peace, the deep need is for a relationship of peace. When relationships are correct, feelings follow... peace brings

order and harmony into what is otherwise chaotic and distorted.”⁵²

We further see in v. 22 that there is a benefit from this peace that God has made through the cross of Christ.

Peace indicates a cessation of hostilities – an end to the battle between our sin nature and our holy God, but there is more to it than that.⁵³ God didn’t end the war just to stop the fight so we can sit in our filthy trenches and continue to accumulate dirt under our fingernails waiting for an opportune moment to rage against Him!

He reconciled us and brought peace to us so that He might cleanse us from our wretched filth and set us apart for His purposes. In that reconciliation, He allows us to shed our guilt and stand against any accusation hurled against us (Rev 12:10) and to live in a manner that is reflective of who God is – holy, above reproach, “without the possibility of anyone accusing you.”⁵⁴

So, in our text, we see both the **justification** of the believer and the **sanctification** of the believer through Jesus.

⁵² Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 227.

⁵³ Chrysostom, “Homilies,” 272.

⁵⁴ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 437.

Justification means that on the merit of Christ's righteousness, those who believe in Him are seen as holy in God's eyes.

Sanctification means that by the work of the Holy Spirit we are made holy, and we are constantly and continually conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:29–30).

Those things are the product of a restored relationship with our holy God through the blood of the cross.

V. 23 | Paul addresses the progressive nature of growing in holiness – **If you continue...**

In this exhortation, Paul puts a practical bow on all of this grand theological teaching as a reminder that the reader of this letter has a personal responsibility to press into the message of the cross and the Godhood of Christ.

All that we have reviewed since v.15 **is the gospel**, in beautiful, lyrical form.

The message is this: Jesus Christ is fully God. He holds the first office over and above all creation. As God, He was and is inextricably involved in creation. Being fully God, and at the will of the Father, He descended from heaven, became a man, and dwelt among His creation. He lived a blameless life marked by holiness. As an act of grace, He submitted to a

common, shameful, public execution. His spilled blood, holy as it is, sufficiently paid the penalty for the sins of the world. In His substitutionary death (dying in our place), Jesus restored a right relationship and established peace for those who believe upon His name, and He will once and for all bring all creation into a right relationship with their creator in due time either by judgment or by faith (Phl 2:9–10). So that, by the work of the cross, He presents the faithful to God just as He is, holy and unassailable in righteousness, since it is His righteousness that we wear, and He is shaping us into His own image by the Holy Spirit until we dwell with Him in eternity. Amen.

This final “**if**” statement that Paul issues to the Colossians should give them cause for self-examination: the gospel of Jesus Christ and nothing else is to be the center of their faith.

As we will see, the Colossians had quite a time chasing after other flashy, spiritual-sounding topics. That is dangerous!

They must, we must, continue to be grounded, steadfast, not moved away from the gospel – the good message. Do not be moved to turn to the left or the right. Do not be distracted by flashy-sounding Christian-ese, things that only have a shadow of the true gospel substance. Cling doggedly, for all you’re worth, to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and His grace shall bear you up (Psa 28:9).

This was Paul's burning purpose, as he proclaimed this message widely and freely. Let this be our hearts' purpose as well.

CHAPTER 6 | COLOSSIANS 1:24–29

Following Paul’s exalted presentation of Christ in the previous verses, he now relates his own personal experiences and ministry, all of which are firmly anchored in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It was especially important for Paul to bring his personal experience and personal focus to bear in this letter since the Colossian church appears to have been dealing with competing ideas of what the central focus of their church should be (Col 2:8, 11, 16–23).

Paul’s message for the Colossians is as timely as ever, and his communication to them regarding his own singular focus on Jesus is an excellent reminder to the church of our age. We must keep Jesus at the center of our focus.

Our efforts should always remain focused on the gospel of Jesus Christ rather than chasing after the fringy, peripheral, debatable-doctrinal paradoxes, word games, or eschatological bingo cards. Our endeavors in ministry would do well to reflect the ministry of the Apostle Paul and his heart to keep Christ at the front and center of his efforts (1 Cor 2:2).

So now, examining Paul's own ministry, we see that he turns again to a common theme throughout his writings to the churches – *rejoicing in suffering*.

V. 24 | During this time, Paul was a very real prisoner. His account of suffering, enumerated for us in his writings to the Corinthians, is far more than figurative language meant to convey internal turmoil, as we modern Christians sometimes portray it.

Here's a sample of Paul's suffering:

Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches (2 Cor 11:24–28 NLT).

We know, from the corpus of Paul's writings, that his ministry was marked by an abundance of physical, mental, and emotional suffering.

And yet, for all of that, he did not complain nor consider his suffering to be a closed-door or divine retribution for some hidden sin, but rather he viewed his suffering as participating fully in the work of Jesus Christ, who suffered for our sakes and gave an example of fidelity in the midst of suffering and abuse.

Paul was moved to rejoice that he participated in Christ's suffering in his own body. In Romans Paul writes: And not only [that], but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance (Rom 5:3).

When a Christian suffers for the cause of Christ, in unity with the sufferings of Christ, who suffered first for our sakes, we can rejoice with the ancient Apostles and the first saints who, when they suffered, viewed their suffering as confirmation that they were living out the gospel faithfully. They saw their suffering as an indication that Christ "counted them worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

Paul likewise rejoiced in his suffering. And he viewed his suffering as a shared fellowship with Christ, **for the church.**

Paul embraced whatever suffering came his way by the will of God as an act of service to the Body of Christ, the church. One of the ways that Paul invested in the church, universally and locally, was by demonstrating tenacious faithfulness and joy in the midst of extreme suffering.

Paul's example of suffering was passed on to the churches, internalized, and embraced by early Christians for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Eusebius relays a second-century example of Christians enduring suffering and persecution in Gaul:

[W]hile we all trembled, [and]... feared that on account of the weakness of her body, she would be unable to make bold confession, Blandina was filled with such power as to be delivered and raised above those who were torturing her by turns from morning till evening in every manner, so that they acknowledged that they were conquered, and could do nothing more to her. And they were astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken; and they testified that one of these forms of torture was sufficient to destroy life, not to speak of so many and so great sufferings. But the blessed woman, like a noble athlete, renewed her strength in her confession; and her comfort and... relief from the pain of her

sufferings was in exclaiming, “I am a Christian, and there is nothing vile done by us.”

But Sanctus also endured marvelously and superhumanly all the outrages which he suffered. While the wicked men hoped, by the continuance and severity of his tortures to wring something from him which he ought not to say, he girded himself against them with such firmness that he would not even tell his name, or the nation or city to which he belonged, or whether he was bond or free, but answered in the Roman tongue to all their questions, “I am a Christian.” ... And his body was a witness of his sufferings, being one complete wound and bruise, drawn out of shape, and altogether unlike a human form. Christ, suffering in him, manifested his glory, delivering him from his adversary, and making him an ensample [sic] for the others, showing that nothing is fearful where the love of the Father is, and nothing painful where there is the glory of Christ.”⁵⁵

This is our heritage, our spiritual parentage – suffering for Jesus’ sake no matter the cost.

Only recently has the idea that “suffering is a bad thing” become normal thought among Christians. Sometimes when

⁵⁵ Eusebius, *The History of the Church (electronic edition)*, tr. A.C. McGiffert (Pantianos Classics: 1890), np.

we encounter the least bit of resistance, we start to wonder if we have run into a closed door, or perhaps God is punishing us for some accidental sin, or that we aren't worthy to participate in ministry. All of that is false!

Suffering is not only a normal part of the Christian experience (when lived in accordance with the gospel), but it is healthy for us. As we maintain joy and actively **rejoice** in our sufferings, then we see that our lives become the gospel message.

V. 25 | Paul affirms his service to the church, understanding that he has been given a stewardship from God and one that he takes seriously no matter the cost to his own self.

Paul's use of the word "stewardship" (οἰκονομία, oikonomia) communicates the sense of a "responsibility to administer, or manage the household of another."⁵⁶ Bratcher and Nida suggest that, "The Greek *oikonomia* [stewardship] means a position of responsibility, an office, a task to perform."⁵⁷ We see here that Paul understood his responsibility to God's household as originating directly from God and demanding his best efforts and attention as he sought to fulfill his God-given role, even in the face of suffering.

⁵⁶ Arndt, *Lexicon*, 697.

⁵⁷ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 38.

We gain further insight into Paul's understanding of his Apostolic office from Acts 9.

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." So, the Lord [said] to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for [one] called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting [his] hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him *how many things he must suffer for My name's sake*" (Acts 9:10-16, emphasis mine).

Paul knew from the beginning of his ministry, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that God had placed him into a ministry marked by suffering, but one that he dared not turn away from.

This was a big deal! Paul was far more than a professional listener! He understood that the work God had set him apart for was not about himself! He writes here in our text that this stewardship from God was given to him *for others*.

And he knew that God had a specific purpose in setting him apart – to reveal a timeless mystery, a mystery that would undoubtedly ruffle some feathers among the “religious” people of his day.

Let’s not forget as well that Paul describes himself as a “minister” (διδάκωνος, *diakonos*). That term means *servant*. A servant is somebody uniquely focused on the benefit of somebody else.

What we gather about Paul is that he wasn’t overly concerned with his own personal circumstances – even when his own rights and human dignity were assaulted. Instead, he willfully placed his own personhood, dignity, and resources at the disposal of Jesus Christ for the sake of others – that is precisely the heart of Jesus!

This is an important and constant reminder that throughout the New Testament, God’s people are called to be servants to others even when that involves suffering and foregoing some of our dearly beloved rights and dignity.

And how did Paul best serve the church? By fulfilling the Word of God or, as other translations and commentators suggest, “*to present to you the word of God in its fullness.*”⁵⁸ That lines up nicely with Paul’s heartfelt address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:27, “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.”

It must be understood that Paul **is** fulfilling God’s Word by fully presenting it to the Colossians, a mainly Gentile congregation.

Paul understood that his ministry was a fulfillment of God’s promise to the Gentiles as he declared in Antioch (quoting Isaiah 49:6): “For so the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth’” (Act 13:47).

V. 26 | In our text, Paul describes his enduring effort to present the gospel to the Gentiles as “revealing to God’s

⁵⁸ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 154.

NLT: “God has given me the responsibility of serving his church by proclaiming his entire message to you.”

NIV: “I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—”

ESV: “of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.”

saints the mystery which had been hidden from ages and generations.”

That’s quite cryptic! But the point of Paul’s language is that through the fullness of God’s Word, God has chosen to reveal to the saints a more meaningful message that is carried throughout the fullness of the Scriptures.

God did not plainly reveal this mystery in times past, but He did reveal it plainly in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Paul writes about this exact thing in Ephesians:

[B]y revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy Apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel (Eph 3:3–6).

We also find a similar thought in Paul’s letter to the Romans:

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began 26 but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the

commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith (Rom 16:25–26).

It is somewhat difficult for Christians to understand the gravity of what Paul is declaring here regarding this revealed mystery because we live in the age of the closed canon of Scripture. To some degree, the mystery that God has grafted Gentiles into His holy family has become “old hat” to us.

If we try to empathize with the ancient saints, we may come close to understanding. Remember that the Scriptures in Jesus’ day were what we call the Old Testament. Of course, Jesus didn’t call them the Old Testament, nor did Paul and the Apostles. Those writings that we have preserved in the Old Testament were often called the law, the prophets, and the writings.

Now, try to imagine how much would you know about Christ based on what you know of the Old Testament and restricted solely to the Old Testament?

Many Bible students, having worked up the courage to study through the Old Testament, have found themselves scratching their heads more than a few times, wondering, “What’s the point of all of these laws?” “Why does Israel seem to blow it all the time?” “What’s up with all of these genealogies and names?” “What is this common thread of

reconciliation with God, atonement, judgment, justice, sacrifice, offering, covenants, etc.” “What’s going on with King David and his children?” “What’s up with this ‘suffering servant’ that Isaiah writes about?” And then there’s all of the figurative language to think about – the scepter of Judah, somebody referred to as Shiloh (Gen 49:10), the root of Jesse (Isa 11:10), etc.

So, in the first century, all of those threads are moving through the collective consciousness of a peculiar religious sect in Roman Palestine. **And then!** A man comes on the scene and says: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39).

So, all of that mystery and head-scratching finally culminates and finds resolution in the body of a man from Nazareth – Jesus, the Christ.

How extraordinary that generation is – to have seen and handled and heard the living Word of God (1 John 1:1–3)! And yet, Jesus says, “Blessed [are] those who have not seen and [yet] have believed” (John 20:29).

So that is part of Paul’s mission – to declare this timeless cosmic mystery, the gospel, to a people who had not seen Christ and yet were invited to believe.

V. 27 | Paul defines the mystery in very plain terms. In case you were getting nervous about that term, mystery, here it is distilled into a concentrated form: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

That, in its distilled form, is a rich message, willed by God to be revealed to the saints through the fullness of and fulfillment of His Word.

If we are Christ’s, then Christ dwells in us. We have become one with Him and He with us, and we shall share in His glory (John 17:22–26).

That is what Paul labored for. Paul suffered for this – to bring the message, an eternal hope of life with Christ, to see His glory, and to participate in His glory by all means (including suffering) forevermore.

Vv. 28–29 | It is **Christ** we preach **and Christ who labors**.

Paul drives the central gospel message home. **Him we preach, warning and teaching!** No side issues, no peripherals, no pet doctrines – the doctrine on which Paul was laser-focused was the doctrine of Jesus Christ!

That is a great encouragement to us to remain steadfast in what we are teaching. Preach no other gospel! Make no other doctrine the focal point of your evangelism or your

discipleship (and there are many to choose from, and many have gone astray chasing after them)! Keep Christ at the center!

As Paul notes, it is the gospel of Jesus, proclaimed by preaching and taught by instruction, that has the power to present people as perfect in Christ and to Christ!

That is what Paul worked hard for, even striving. The Greek gives the sense of “to fight, struggle” and “to engage in intense struggle,... against strong opposition.”⁵⁹

Notice that Paul isn’t striving for the gospel in his own strength.

Christ is working in him and through Him. When we allow Christ to work in us, we are nearly assured that the gospel will remain at the center of our efforts.

So many Christians lose focus and strive about things other than Jesus, and this is a call to return to the main thing, the only thing that can save souls – the gospel – and the only name by which men must be saved – Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

⁵⁹ Arndt, *Lexicon*, 17 and Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 495.

Christ is the overwhelming theme of Paul's message to the Colossians. I pray that we who are called by His name may keep Christ the center of our message as well.

CHAPTER 7 | COLOSSIANS 2:1–10

We now enter into chapter two of Colossians, and unsurprisingly, we find that Paul continues to focus on Christ as the center of his every endeavor.

Interestingly enough, there is some shared language between the last verse of chapter one and the first verse of chapter two (bearing in mind that chapter breaks were added to the text much later).

In Col 1:29, Paul writes that he is, “*striving* (ἀγωνιζόμενος, agonizomenos) according to His [Christ’s] working.”

In Col 2:1, Paul writes that he has “a great *conflict* (ἀγῶνα, agona)” for the Colossians and Laodiceans.

While it is not super apparent in the English translation, these two words – striving and conflict – share a common root word in the original language and reside in the same semantic domain.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ “**ἀγωνιζομαι**: to engage in intense struggle, involving physical or nonphysical force against strong opposition—to struggle, to fight.” Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 495.

So then, it appears that Paul has quite intentionally chosen his words, as inspired by the Holy Spirit, to demonstrate that he feels some sense of obligation to fight for the Colossians; and within him lives this struggle for the church – even though he had not met them face to face.

Before we dig into the remainder of the text, we should take time to consider the impact that this sense of striving for the church ought to have on the lives of Christians across the globe!

Paul had not met these people personally, but he knew, based on their reputation and the reports of others, that they were believers.

The great conflict he experienced on their behalf was not **against them** but **for them**.

Sadly, many churches and many Christians have embraced a competitive culture where we believe that we are striving against other churches to gain market share or advance our own position or agenda. That can be even easier to engage in and certainly more palatable for local churches when we find that we disagree on minor doctrinal issues with those “other, weird” churches in our community.

But Paul’s conflict was **for** these churches. The competition he waged was on their behalf. Paul wasn’t worried about

building up his own brand or dominating the church landscape. He wasn't trying to rule over them like some authoritarian dictator or own them or dominate them. Instead, the sense we get from Paul's writings is that he was devoted to the gospel in such a way that called the churches to hold fast to the core of their shared faith – Jesus Christ.

That is what we see in the following verses, a call to the center of our faith – Jesus. And I pray that is the heart that the Lord Jesus would give us by His Holy Spirit, so that we might compete for the saints no matter what church they go to, insofar as we agree on the gospel message.

We are not to be competing with one another – we are all in this fight to advance the kingdom together.

Since we agree on the foundational and transformational center of the gospel, let us endeavor to strive for one another, not against one another. Let us not divide what was meant to be united. Let us build one another up as we keep Jesus Christ at the center of our efforts.

Vv. 1–3 is one grand Pauline sentence that furthers the ideas we have introduced – that churches aren't competing with one another, but that we are competing for one another.

Paul is concerned for the whole church, even those who are personally unknown to him. He not only addresses the local

saints in Colossae, but he also demonstrates a concern for their sister church in Laodicea. Laodicea was located just north of Colossae and was considered a larger city. Paul mentions Laodicea five times in his letter to the Colossians, even imploring them to share each other's mail!⁶¹ Paul also wrote to the Laodiceans (a letter unknown to us and lost to time) and desired that his letters to each church should be shared with their sister congregation (Col 4:16).

Paul wanted them to know of his striving, of this concern that he had for them. With so many other things going on in their lives and so many other doctrines competing for their attention and affection, Paul wanted them to know of his great concern for them, hoping that would result in a three-fold benefit in their lives: their hearts may be encouraged, they would be knit together in love, and they would gain all of the spiritual riches that come with a complete understanding of Christ.

Paul really had a heart to lift up the saints. There was certainly enough turmoil and chaos in the first century to cause any believer to be anxious, uncertain, or fearful. Paul addresses those common challenges throughout his writings, always with encouragement (Rom 8:15; Phil 4:6; 2 Tim 1:7). It is a

⁶¹ David Seal, "Laodicea," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

blessed call to encourage the hearts of others! And there is always a need!

Paul desired unity among the saints so they would be “knit together in love.” Or, as the original language suggests (συνβιβάζω, *sumbibazo*), “to bring together into a unit... unite.”⁶²

The bond of that unity, what ties us to one another, is love. This is indeed challenging. We live in an age where we saints are quite fond of constructing escape routes and quick off-ramps relative to our church experience. Quite often, church is a place we visit, not an organism we are tied to. But when one finds a body of believers who are committed to one another and knit together by love, he has found an extraordinary thing, a biblical thing.

And as the Colossians and Laodiceans grew in their love for one another, they would certainly find in their collective journey of sanctification that Christ holds “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Christ is the one who causes unity, love, and understanding. All of those blessed things we long for as a church community begin and end in Christ.

Do you find yourself desiring to grow in your theological understanding or at least to be theologically sound? Look to

⁶² Arndt, *Lexicon*, 956.

Jesus. Do you desire to be wise? Look to Jesus. Do you desire to be more loving? Look to Jesus. Do you desire abundant peace and stability? Look to Jesus. Press into Him, mine the riches found in the person and work of Jesus Christ – you can never exhaust them (Rom 11:33; Eph 3:8).

The temptation for the Colossians, and for us, is to abandon our excavation of the person and work of Jesus in favor of something else that appears flashier, newer, more exciting – typically dealing with subject matter that is far less developed or knowable and far more open to individual interpretation.

The danger is that what we typically find in chasing after other knowledge, understanding, or wisdom tied to peripheral, ambiguous doctrines is that our human understanding of those things is quite shallow, becomes exhausted quickly, and hasn't really done much to encourage, build up, or bind up in love, nor has our digging in that shallow dirt really made us anymore like Jesus.

Jesus Christ must be the main thing. The overwhelming, inexhaustible result of digging into Christ consistently and faithfully is a vast treasury of understanding and knowledge of the grandest message ever presented to mankind – the gospel, the mystery of God.

V. 4 | Paul plainly states his purpose for focusing so strictly on the work of Jesus thus far. To this point, Paul has not deviated in his discourse from dealing with Jesus Christ. Quite simply, Paul wants the readers and hearers of this letter to understand their focus **and** to ensure that they are measuring what they hear in their community, those persuasive words meant to deceive, against the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“The verb ‘to deceive’ is used elsewhere only in James 1:22, and means ‘to convince by false reasoning, to delude, mislead, lead astray.’”⁶³

Douglas Moo remarks about this portion of Colossians:

The theology, and especially the high Christology, of 1:1–2:3 has, then, a direct practical purpose: to keep believers from being deceived by fine-sounding arguments.... So for us: paying too much attention to fine-sounding arguments can deceive us about religious and spiritual truth. Paul has no doubt about the vital importance of spiritual truth, and he knows how perilously easy it is for believers to be led astray by high-flown rhetoric (or, in our day, by “multimedia presentations”). The antidote for such false

⁶³ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 47.

teaching is the “cogent proof” of Christ’s absolute supremacy and exclusivity.⁶⁴

Jesus must be the center! That simple truth, Jesus as our eternal compass bearing, will keep us from being deceived.

Bear in mind that part of what makes deception possible is how cleverly crafted and convincing the proposed deception appears to be. It seems **almost** right – but we must ask, how does it square with the gospel? How does it square with the person and work of Jesus?

Is it some argument that proposes to take attention away from the main thing – the gospel of Jesus Christ? Is it some argument that proposes to add to the gospel of Jesus Christ? Is it some argument that seeks to obscure the gospel of Jesus Christ by “adding to” it or taking away from it?

Christendom has seen all of these tactics and then some – some from **within** the church and some externally)! Do not be deceived! Keep Christ at the center.

Know how to spot those vain arguments and doctrinal disputes that are not focused on Christ. John Calvin helps us identify that in part when he writes, “For what is the reason why mankind have involved themselves in so many wicked

⁶⁴ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 172.

opinions, in so many idolatries, in so many foolish speculations, but this—that, despising the simplicity of the gospel, they have ventured to aspire higher? All the errors, accordingly,... must be reckoned as proceeding from this ingratitude—that, not resting satisfied with Christ alone, they have given themselves up to strange doctrines.”⁶⁵

V. 5 | Paul gives additional encouragement by letting the Colossians know that his presence is with them. Not in a weird, new-age, astral projection way – but that his concern for them is real, and they are on his mind and heart in a substantial way.

Just because they are geographically separated doesn't mean that they are dead to one another or divorced from one another. Far from it!

In fact, a solid scriptural argument can be made that the saints in Colossae, while distant from Paul (and any number of Apostles and churches), remained more profoundly and substantially connected and united with the Body of Christ, the universal church, because of a shared **spirit – the Holy Spirit**. This remains true for us today!

⁶⁵ John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 176.

And for Paul, his language indicates to us that in his present physical separation, he still actively rejoiced and actively saw their good order as a church (probably from Epaphras, the proposed founder of the church – Col 1:7; 4:12) and their steadfastness to the fundamental tenets of the gospel – faith in Christ.

Paul continues in this vein, encouraging them to remain steadfast in their faith and to walk it out in their lives. But consider momentarily where this affirmation of their resolve, stability, and orderly faith is placed within the text – right after warning them about being deceived.

The sense then is that they are doing well – they are stable and orderly, focusing on Jesus – but they must be on guard (Eph 5:15–16). Paul had seen other churches that “ran well” but were hindered by clever-sounding arguments and had unfortunately shifted the congregation's focus towards something other than Jesus (Gal 5:7).

Vv. 6–7 | So what? What's the application?

Keep going! Additionally, there is not only an imperative for continued progress in Christ but an acknowledgment of a firmness from Christ.

We see the idea of a confident, grounded, strengthened, forged faith that has come through instruction in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And as they continue to walk out their faith and be strengthened, they are also instructed to give thanks as they continue to grow and abound in Christ. From this instruction, we understand that the unified church of the saints is a community of people firmly anchored in Jesus, with no other spiritual goals but to be found diligently pursuing Jesus.

V. 8 | – The warning.

Beware – be teachable, be humble, be anchored in Jesus. We are not as smart as we think we are. Often, we are not as intellectually rigorous with the media presented to us as we believe we are. We certainly aren't as intellectually rigorous as we ought to be.

A 2001 study titled *The Color of Odors* examined the effect of color on odor and taste perception of wines. In the experiment, wine experts were presented with two glasses of wine: one red and one white. Each was asked to describe the wine as they experienced it. The experts used words like *citrus*, *flower*, *lemon*, and *honey* to describe the white wine, whereas they used words like *clove*, *musk*, and

crushed red fruit to describe the red. However, all of the experts had been unwittingly duped: both glasses actually contained the same white wine, the only difference between them being a little red food coloring in one glass. Not a single expert was even able to identify that both glasses contained white wine, and they all described the colored white wine as they would have a red.⁶⁶

Cling to what you know for certain! Don't allow somebody to deceive you into indulging in emptiness. Paul uses the word "cheat" to describe the trade-off – we're being robbed of our actual treasure for something that is hollow, meaningless, and has no benefit to the hearer if we choose to shift our focus to something other than Jesus.

Additionally, we ought to beware of what we are engaging in! In our world, where everybody has a platform to propagate lies as facts through slick marketing and presentation software, we need to be very discerning.

Unfortunately, we also need to ensure that if we are engaging in "Christian" media that we also, like the Berean saints, search the Scriptures daily to find out if what is being said is absolutely true (Acts 17:11). Don't just assume what you have heard or seen is true; there are many wolves out there in

⁶⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-babble/201412/why-were-so-easily-fooled-and-why-it-matters>.

sheep's clothing seeking to manipulate God's flock. Search the Scriptures and see!

If this seems a little heavy-handed, remember Paul's exhortation to Timothy:

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane [and] idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge – by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace [be] with you. Amen (1Tim 6:20–21).

And again in 2 Timothy:

Remind [them] of these things, charging [them] before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane [and] idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness (2 Tim 2:14–16).

V. 9–10 | Finally, Jesus is all you need.

In Him dwells all that God is. He is God with us, God in us.

If we seek to supplement Christ with something else, we have lost our way. He is over all creation, all powers, all ruling authority, and by Him, we are made complete.

You don't need anything else except Jesus, and then all of those spiritual riches that He has promised are yours. Where we are lacking in our understanding and wisdom, Jesus promises that the Spirit Himself will be our teacher (John 14:26).

Don't let philosophy, smooth talk, marketing, etc., frame your understanding of Jesus – since He is the head of **all** principality and power and over all things – allow Jesus to frame your understanding of those things.

We are complete in Him and must remain focused on Him. Do not be led astray but rather press into the riches of Christ and learn from Him. Be conformed to His image, and you will certainly find joy as you walk in His Spirit, in His kingdom.

Be encouraged, loved one. Christ **is** the center.

CHAPTER 8 | COLOSSIANS 2:11–17

Previously, Paul has led the Colossians to understand that they have been made complete in Christ, who is the Head over all things, in dignity and authority, and that their focus ought to remain on Christ.

This is important to remember as we venture on in the text, coming upon one of the most commonly addressed issues in the NT – circumcision among the early church (which is addressed approximately 54 times!)

V. 11–12 | The topic of circumcision sometimes causes believers and Bible students to turn a little squeamish when we delve into the particulars of circumcision, but we need not go so far into the details to understand Paul's point.

Circumcision, the surgical cutting away of the flesh, which can seem quite barbaric, was a symbolic act of covenant obedience established to remind Israel of their heritage and separateness from the world around them.

God instituted it with Abraham in Genesis 17, before the child of promise (Isaac), before Jacob (later renamed Israel), before the Exodus out of Egypt, before Mt. Sinai, and before

the Ten Commandments and the giving of the Law. Before all of those things that we understand as inextricably bound up in the identity of the nation of Israel, God instituted the covenant of circumcision with Abraham, along with promises of multiplication, a new land, and even kings from his blood line.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I [am] Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.” And God said to Abraham: “As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you

and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ***This [is] My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised;*** and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you” (Gen 17:1–11, emphasis mine).

Circumcision was a significant ritual for God’s special, chosen, covenant people. It was such a big deal that God almost killed Moses because Moses neglected that ancient covenant in his day (Ex 4:24–26)!

What about in the church age?

One could argue, quite successfully, that Jewish believers had a scriptural foundation to defend circumcision in the first-century church (unlike some of the unscriptural, nonsensical traditions propagated among churches today).

There was even a provision made in the Law for foreigners (Gentiles) to choose to undergo the rite of circumcision if they desired to participate in the Passover Feast (Ex 12:43–49). It would be too easy for a Jewish believer to point to the Law and say, “Read this. Don’t you want to participate fully in this? Well, that requires circumcision.”

This was a common misrepresentation of the faith in the first century against which Paul vehemently battled. In fact, it was one of the central arguments Paul wrote against in his letter to the churches in Galatia.

Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. 3 And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law (Gal 5:2–3).

And again:

As many as desire to make a good showing in the flesh, these [would] compel you to be circumcised, only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ. For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation (Gal 6:12–15).

In our text, Paul doesn't directly oppose a specific party of Judaizers who would have been peddling the doctrine of circumcision among Gentile believers (as he does in Gal 5:12!) but rather alludes to the practice to demonstrate to the

Colossians a more tangible form of circumcision or removal of the flesh from the body – the circumcision of Christ, made without hands, that exists in the spiritual plane and in the heart of the believer⁶⁷ (Deut 10:16, 30:6; 1 Sam 16:7; Jer 4:4; Rom 2:27, 29).

Paul's intent is not necessarily to cast aspersions on his own covenant brethren or to convince Jewish people that they no longer have to be part of the everlasting covenant that God delivered to them. Remember that Paul was a Pharisee. In fact, Paul affirmed that the Jewish believers of his day and the "devout proselytes" [Gentiles converted to Judaism] should continue in the grace of God as they were (Acts 13:43). Paul didn't add to or take away from their devotion as they worshipped God based upon their conviction and understanding of the Scriptures and heart for Jesus.

Paul's intent is to keep the church (Jewish or Greek – Rom 1:16, 10:12; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11) focused on the true source of salvation – Jesus Christ.

To that extent, Paul reminds the Colossians that their salvation was not won by ceremony or ritual but by the holy, grave-conquering actions of their Savior, Jesus.

⁶⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 103.

It is Christ who, by His work, separates the entire “body of the sins of the flesh” from those He is making holy. Grasping this truth results in a faith-based salvation rather than a works-based salvation.

Notice, too, in vv. 11–12 that Paul connects the two ideas of circumcision and baptism in one sentence. He moves seamlessly from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant.

While Jewish believers had participated in circumcision in their infancy, by compulsion (Lev 12:3), now believers participate in an especially distinct and elective ordinance observed by the church and instituted by Jesus Christ Himself – baptism.

Inasmuch as Paul explains in v. 11 that circumcision is actually meant to be spiritual in nature and communicates a spiritual truth about the separateness of the believer and the faithfulness of God – so too, baptism communicates a spiritual truth about the believer choosing to identify with Christ’s death and resurrection.

And insofar as we are willing to accept the truth that bodily circumcision is not **required** for the salvation of believers (as championed by Paul in the NT), we must be willing to concede then that physical baptism exists within the same

realm – it is a physical act that communicates a spiritual truth about the saints uniting with Jesus.

Neither circumcision nor baptism has the intrinsic power to earn our salvation. They are physical models of a spiritual truth that God has gifted us with to teach the profound nature of our relationship with Him – and in some way to demonstrate what it means to participate in Christ’s death and resurrection.

If you haven’t realized by now, God quite often uses picture lessons (divine illustrations through human action) to communicate grand theological truth throughout Scripture.

These two ordinances – one from the Old Covenant and one from the New – serve as God’s divine picture lessons to us, and they give us quite a bit to think about and consider.

Paul explains that it is “through faith” that we participate in Christ’s death and resurrection through *God’s work* – not our own.

So then, Christians have a new special event that communicates the New Covenant – baptism, not circumcision. Or, as Henry Alford writes, “The completeness

of your Christian circumcision [is] realized in your baptism.”⁶⁸

By baptism, we profess our belief in the death of Christ, we profess our belief in His resurrection from the dead, which communicates new life, and we declare our desire to participate fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ, no matter the cost.

In some regards, baptism outstrips the message of circumcision as a further amplified message of God’s covenant promises. Whereas the basic ordinance of circumcision communicates the removal of the flesh (sin nature), subsequently the spiritual circumcision of Christ communicates the removal of the entire body of sin; baptism communicates a complete dying to self and promise of resurrection (Rom 6:3–4).

V. 13 | Paul continues to add definition to the state of the believer entering into baptism: “you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him.”

Note that Paul is addressing the plural body of believers here, using the second-person plural form of the pronoun “you,” not the singular (read “you all”). The instruction Paul delivers

⁶⁸ Alford, *Greek Testament*, 220.

applies to all the hearers and readers of this letter at Colossae, Laodicea, and prophetically, our age too.

The text may be read as, “**You all** being dead in your trespasses.”

Paul succinctly explains the inward condition of humans, acknowledging the facts as they are, that we **all**, apart from Christ, are dead.

The hope of the gospel, the truth of the gospel, is that dead men are resurrected by the Spirit of God working in them as proven by Christ’s own resurrection.

Jesus is the one who has made them alive. It is not by their own contrivance or participation in any ceremony that has sparked them to life but Christ working in them, imparting His own resurrection power to them. And those He brings to life out of this darkened world of death are made alive **with Him**, positionally speaking.

We must understand that our new lives bring us into proximity with Christ and into a state of being **like Him**. We were not raised from our deathbeds to remain zombified humans, distant and separated from Christ, waiting for the next thing to happen to us, but to be truly alive humans, near to Jesus, and busy with the work of our Lord.

This resurrection that we participate in holds the power to remove that nagging human condition of guilt. He has forgiven us *all trespasses*.

The result of Christ's work is the redemption of humans completely **in all realms of our lives**, including those psychological realms that wage war on our minds, presenting to us our failings and fanning the flames of guilt. Jesus brings life to the lifeless in totality.

V. 14 (when read with v.13) advances the idea and further details the forgiveness that Christ has bestowed upon His saints. We find out what required such transformative forgiveness in the first place.

In keeping with the traditional understanding of Paul's denunciation of Judaizers in the church, the natural inference may be to interpret this as a reference to the Jewish Law.

That is certainly a critical discussion to have, especially when we consider Paul's treatment of circumcision, dietary restrictions, feasts, and sabbaths.

N.T. Wright assists us with a more accurate understanding of Paul's view of the OT Law. He writes, "The Mosaic Torah [Law] did not... stand over against Jews and Gentiles in the same way. In Paul's view, it shut up the Jews under sin and shut out the Gentiles from the hope and promise of

membership in God's people.... God has erased its accusing demands and removed them from the scene altogether. No longer need Jews be under its curse; no longer can it keep Gentiles out of God's family."⁶⁹

Notably, Paul's word choice here (χειρόγραφον, *keirógraphon*) communicates the idea of indebtedness. Specifically, it means "a hand-written document, specif. a certificate of indebtedness, account, record of debts"⁷⁰ and "a record of financial accounts."⁷¹

This is significant for the Gentile believer. We have to understand that the handwriting of requirements against us isn't because of our failure to observe a covenant passed on to an ancient Semitic people, but because we as Gentiles were born dead-broke into a broken creation.

To further the financial metaphor: as pagan Gentiles, we never possessed the credit score to become part of the club anyway!

⁶⁹ N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 117–119.

⁷⁰ Arndt, *Lexicon*, 1083.

⁷¹ Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 393.

This affirms Paul's assessment of the spiritual condition of those outside the covenant as "dead in your trespasses and uncircumcision."⁷²

Now, on the other hand, and to keep the metaphor running, the Jewish believers didn't possess the required capital to pay the bills they accrued while in the club!

As Paul writes to the Romans, "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law [is] the knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20).

So then, all of creation, Hebrew and Gentile alike, groaned for a Savior – someone to settle accounts, bring freedom, and provide humanity with that blessed sigh of relief that comes from having one's debts wiped out, obliterated⁷³ (Rom 8:19–22).

That debt was paid in full at the cross of Calvary as Jesus stood in our place to settle accounts – the righteous for the unrighteous. He took our spiritual poverty and gave us His riches in exchange.

⁷² Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 114.

⁷³ "ἐξάλειψω –...the more general mng. to remove so as to leave no trace, remove, destroy, obliterate." Arndt, *Lexicon*, 344.

V. 15 | In doing so, Jesus completely upended any claim of ownership that any spiritual rulers or authorities had over humanity.⁷⁴

Or, as the Message admirably presents, “He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.”⁷⁵

Nothing on God’s green earth, nor in heaven above, nor in the galaxy that extends far beyond our understanding has a claim to God’s people.

Remember that Colossians is a uniquely Christological epistle, and here Paul reminds the reader, as he has often done up to this point, that Jesus Christ is the Head over all creation. This should be a great source of comfort to those Christians who wring their hands over a variety of religious ignorance: adherence to the Law, demonic possession or oppression, influences of the world, theological trick questions, the debate over secret sin, etc.

Everything has been conquered by Jesus and is being conquered by Jesus, who reigns supreme over all things

⁷⁴ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 63.

⁷⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), Col 2:15.

forevermore and has established His kingdom and is establishing His kingdom (2 Cor 10:5).

V. 16–17 | Since Jesus rules over all things and has erased the ledger of our debts, then don't allow others to contrive a separate ledger. There's no second set of books against us. Don't participate in a false economy driven by man's desire for control and self-accounted righteousness.

The idea is plain. Some people would try to claim a higher degree of holiness or devotion based on their diet – choosing to abstain from certain types of food or drink for an ostensibly religious purpose. Don't participate in that! “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17).

While we can identify echoes of Judaism in this admonition, Bratcher and Nida point out that these practices were embraced by the Greeks as well and “springs from widespread Greek ideas that by abstaining from food and drink (especially from meat and wine) a person was able more adequately to worship the gods.”⁷⁶

So then Paul's exhortation to the Colossians to not allow themselves to be controlled by legalists for the sheer sake of

⁷⁶ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 65.

appearing “spiritual” is not only constrained to those with a Jewish inclination but to the Gentiles in Colossae as well (who likely made up the majority of the church).

The application for our age is, of course, still relevant. Let us begin with the imperative in v. 16. “Let no one judge you.” That’s a tricky command, right? How can we control the attitudes and actions of others? How can we make sure that those critical, haughty, self-righteous, heavy-handed people moving among the saints are kept in check when they begin to reach for Jesus’ position as head of the church and begin to dictate to God’s people additional requirements for salvation or holiness?⁷⁷ That’s the tricky part.

That is where the concept of church discipline would need to come into play to potentially bring scriptural rebuke and correction with the goal of achieving repentance and reconciliation.

Since we are not to allow legalists to control the body, we can infer that we are not to **be legalists either**, seeking to control others through petty rituals, food, drink, special days, etc.! Don’t get too big for your breeches!

And what’s more – if we go down the path of focusing on those nit-picky subjects of what others are eating or drinking,

⁷⁷ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 266.

or whether or not somebody celebrates a certain holiday or not, then we have lost our bearings in our discipleship and our church community.

Remember what Jesus taught about this kind of thing: “Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man” (Mat 15:11).

Furthermore, Paul writes that all of those things are merely a shadow of future things and that the substantial Body of our faith is Christ.

The Greek text reads: τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ, literally “but the body of Christ.”⁷⁸ The equative verb “is” is supplied in the translation. It is interesting to consider what Paul may be communicating regarding the shadow cast in the present of future things that speak to the physical body of Christ. It appears that scholars agree that Paul may be purposefully “exploiting a double entendre”⁷⁹ here since Paul deals with the church in his instruction, and I quite agree, especially based on Paul’s other uses of the terminology relating to the

⁷⁸ Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 66.

⁷⁹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 125–126.

“Body of Christ” throughout the NT (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12–27; Eph 1:22–23; 5:30).⁸⁰

Or, as the NLT proposes, “He Himself is that reality” (Heb 8:5; 10:1).

So again, Paul continues to amass his doctrinal position firmly in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is what matters.

A point of reflection for each Christian must be – what doctrines do we spend most of our time considering, thinking about, studying, chewing on? If the answer isn’t resoundingly the person and work of Jesus Christ, then we need to recalibrate and keep Christ at the center, at the head.

Since He rules over all things, since He is the head of all powers and principalities, then He certainly deserves that place in the lives of His saints and the life of His church. Let nothing in your theology de-throne Jesus. He is our reality.

⁸⁰ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 116–117. Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 224. Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 177.

CHAPTER 9 | COLOSSIANS 2:18–23

Continuing in Colossians, we see that Paul advances his assault against legalism – a strict adherence to a set of rules meant to convey a sense of moral goodness or religious superiority. He reminds the Colossians that they should remain firmly focused on Jesus Christ, connected to Him as the Head, and not dissuaded by any person or outside influence that would try to convince them otherwise.

V. 18 is a parallel thought to v. 16. In v.16, Paul writes, “*Let no one judge you.*”

Paul is indicating that the Colossian church was dealing with some faction of judgmental believers who sought a high position from where they could look down on Christ’s Body and cast their judgments and condemnations about what people were eating and drinking and what holidays people were keeping or not keeping, and so forth.

Now in v. 18 Paul writes, “*Let no one cheat you.*”

Before we go any further, we must acknowledge the difficulty with what is before us. Douglas Moo suggests that v.18 is

“arguably the most difficult verse in Colossians to interpret.”⁸¹

A brief examination of the translational differences between the popular Bible versions of today is sufficient to demonstrate that point:

NKJV Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

KJV 1900 Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

ESV Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

NASB95 Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,

⁸¹ Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 224.

NIV Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.

NLT Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud,

The Message Don't tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions. They're a lot of hot air, that's all they are.

The basic cause for these translational differences is found in the Greek text, which uses a term that indicates someone standing as a false referee or judge among and over the Colossian believers.⁸² So the various translators have chosen several different, albeit inter-related, ways of communicating that sense.

⁸² Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 67. “καταβραβεύω: to judge as a referee that someone is not worthy to receive a prize—to disqualify, to condemn, to judge as not worthy of a reward, to deprive of a reward.’ μηδεις ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύετω ‘let no one disqualify you’ or ‘let no one judge that you should not receive the prize’ Col 2:18.” Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 364. “καταβραβεύω... ‘decide against’ (as umpire), and so rob of a prize, condemn.” Arndt, *Lexicon*, 515.

The basic notion is this: Don't let anyone who is making a big show about how spiritual they are, how humble they are, and going on and on about all of their quasi-spiritual experiences and religious practices cheat you, beguile you, disqualify you, defraud you, condemn you, or run your life. All of their supposed inside knowledge is an indication of their big fat heads! You already have the treasure! You are already part of the kingdom, so turn away from the knock-off, cheap substitute that false teachers and legalists are pushing as a superior way of discipleship.⁸³

John Calvin remarked about this passage, "All those who draw us aside from the simplicity of Christ cheat us out of the prize of our high calling."⁸⁴

V. 19 | Paul describes how such people, who arrogantly presume to take the position of a referee within the Body of Christ, arrived at their current position – they let go of the Head, Jesus.

They became disconnected from Christ by chasing after all of those things that they are now found to be forcing upon other Christians.

⁸³ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 117–118.

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 194.

This is a very real danger for all believers – to become disconnected from the Head, to leave the rich simplicity of Christ, for other things that are ostensibly connected to the gospel but are really “a shadow of things to come” (v. 17) or worse, outright lies. Many saints over the generations have fallen victim to this trap.

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus taught the disciples an important truth that we need to be reminded of from time to time: “I am the vine, you [are] the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw [them] into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:5–6).

It appears that in the church at Colossae were people who thought they were the vine but, in reality, were just a bunch of dead branches only fit for the woodpile.

Furthermore, we see that Jesus as the Head causes nourishment, unity, connectedness, and growth in accordance with God’s will.

There is an important point of application here for those who would seek to grow in their discipleship and maturity – growth comes through remaining connected to Christ and

brings about all of those things we long for in the ideal church.

In a lovely reminder of what we grow into, Paul addressed the Ephesians: “till we all come to the unity of the faith and **of the knowledge of the Son of God**, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature **of the fullness of Christ**; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, **may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ**” (Eph 4:13–15). So then, we see that as Christians grow and mature, we become more and more focused on Christ and more and more **like** Christ.

The mark of the maturing Christian isn’t found anywhere else outside of a resemblance to Jesus Christ. And, as we grow, we cause growth in one another; we build each other up because that’s the nature and heart of Jesus. It’s all so natural when we remain focused on the Lord Jesus. We shed those immature childish doctrines of men and come to rest in Jesus.

Vv. 20–22 | Paul challenges the Colossians concerning any sort of submission to, or participation in, any type of syncretistic religion that would put them into bondage by those things that they have once and for all been delivered from through Jesus.

The statement “**if** you died with Christ” is not an indication of uncertainty.⁸⁵ The matter has been settled in Col 2:11–14, where Paul assesses their condition, noting that they **were** buried with Christ in baptism and raised with Christ through faith in the working of God. *And* in their current resurrection state, with Christ, there is no longer a list of ordinances, debts, or requirements against them because Jesus Christ has removed it at Calvary.

So then, v. 20 communicates the idea: **since** you died with Christ (as the NIV translates), why are you allowing yourselves to be manipulated by these false judges and referees into participating in vain religious regulations based on worldly wisdom.

While we may take it for granted, the simple idea that the gospel is about Jesus Christ alone and no other stack of outward requirements is sometimes an earth-shattering revelation for new believers!

⁸⁵ This is a good example of a “First Class Conditional Indicative,” which is “the use of the indicative in the protasis of conditional sentences. The conditional element is made explicit with the particle εἰ. This is a relatively common usage of the indicative, though much more so with the first class condition (over 300 instances) than with the second (less than 50 examples). The first class condition indicates the assumption of truth for the sake of argument, while the second class condition indicates the assumption of an untruth for the sake of argument.” Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 450.

Some Christians pay lip service to this idea even while denying it in everyday life. Some Christians don't even go that far and profess to have found a "better way" to be a Christian, while piling all sorts of extra-biblical requirements onto those dear souls who in a moment of faith, dared call on the Lord Jesus, hoping that they would find something they had never experienced – true freedom.

Unfortunately, our modern era of discipleship shares much in common with the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces. You won't go in yourselves, and you don't let others enter either.... What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn that person into twice the child of hell you yourselves are (Mat 23:13, 15)!

Vv. 21–22 lays out precisely the type of man-made traditions and religious requirements that people think make for a "more superior" Christian and even a "more superior" person.

Don't touch, Don't taste, Don't handle.

Naturally, this reminds us of the Jewish dietary laws that were important to distinguishing the “otherness” or “separateness” of the Jewish people.

Given that we live in an age where most Christians don’t have a Jewish heritage, which is the opposite of the first Christians in and around Jerusalem, it is sometimes difficult for us to imagine these customs creeping into our modern churches. However, the NT presents the temptation toward religious rigidity as a very real and present threat.

This is the basis of legalism, a draw toward the measurably, demonstrably holy. And, while we may amend the playbook from time to time to fit our cultural context, the basic tenets of guilt, control, and power over others remain the same.

One clever illustration demonstrates the absurdity of legalism:

During the afternoon, I asked Dr. Klausner (professor in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem) if he would sign my autograph album to which he replied, “No, I am sorry; but it is the Sabbath.” I did not know until I made inquiry that night that the Talmud asserts that writing two words in succession is work, and if a man even signs his name on the Sabbath he has broken the Law.

As those of us gathered in his study discussing one subject after another, Dr. Klausner would climb a little stepladder and bring down some heavy tome from his shelves, open it, point to some relevant passage, then return the book and soon take down another. The Talmud says nothing about bringing down books from shelves as work—to write two words would be labor, but to develop a perspiration by reaching up for volumes and vigorously discussing them is not work!

This is a perfect illustration of what our Lord meant when he talked about his contemporaries “holding the tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:3). —Dr. Wilbur M. Smith” [one of the founders of Fuller Theological Seminary].⁸⁶

And another:

A pastor discovered one Sunday morning that the roads were blocked and the only way he could reach church was to skate on the river, which he did. When he arrived, the elders of the church were horrified that their preacher should skate on the Sabbath. After service, they had a meeting and he explained that it was either to skate or not

⁸⁶ Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*, 726.

to get there. Finally, one asked: “Did you enjoy it?” When the young man said no, they decided it was all right.⁸⁷

Many of our modern churches have just as many extra-biblical prohibitions that we teach as essential or, at the very least, evidence of salvation. Most of these are generally identifiable externally but ignore the state of the heart.

Paul writes about the real danger that will come upon the churches in the latter times:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, [and commanding] to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God [is] good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer ([1 Tim 4:1–5]).

Sadly, not a few of us can bring to mind several examples that fit Paul’s warning.

⁸⁷ Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*, 726.

But take heart. We are free in Christ! Or, as Paul so plainly states to the Galatians: “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal 5:1).

V. 23 | We find here that the issues of legalism (adhering to a contrived code of religious observance by compulsion) continue to assail the saints exactly because they **project an appearance of wisdom** and so take on a certain weight of theological rightness even though such prohibitions may, in fact, be matters of conscience or considered as “disputable” matters.

D.A. Carson wrote a tremendous article for *Themelios* outlining the ebb and flow of “disputable matters,” noting:

Immediately... we recognize that some things that were thought theologically indisputable in the past have become disputable. Paedobaptism was at one time judged in some circles to be so indisputably right that Anabaptists could be drowned with a clear conscience: if they wanted to be immersed, let us grant them their wish. Until the last three or four decades, going to movies and drinking alcohol was prohibited in the majority of American evangelical circles: the prohibition, in such circles, was indisputable. Nowadays most evangelicals view such prohibitions as archaic at best, displaced by a

neat transfer to the theologically disputable column....
Moreover, some things can cross the indisputable/
disputable divide the other way. For example, in the past
many Christians judged smoking to fall among the
adiaphora [indifferent/disputable things], but their
number has considerably shrunk. Scientifically
demonstrable health issues tied to smoking, reinforced by
a well-embroidered theology of the body, has ensured
that for most Christians smoking is indisputably a no-
no.⁸⁸

The line of thinking goes something like this: since it may be
wise to abstain from alcohol and nicotine, then we should tie
that to our theology. But remember, loved one, Jesus **plus
anything else equals nothing**. We are saved by Christ alone
in the midst of our wretchedness and not because we
deserved it. No number of behaviors that we abstain from
and no amount of things that we do have the power to
commend us to God, except the body and blood of Jesus
Christ.

People will always endeavor to make a good show in the flesh
so that they may boast in their own works, their own

⁸⁸ D. A. Carson, "Editorial: On Disputable Matters," *Themelios* 40, no. 3 (2015): 383.

demonstrable self-righteousness. False believers will always feign humility to curry favor and position.

True believers will remain firmly anchored in Christ, boasting in His flesh, adopting His humility – a humility that demonstrates the grace of God extended to wretched sinners who were made in His image and re-made in His image upon coming to Jesus.

No matter how long we are able to keep up the ruse of self-imposed asceticism and false humility, eventually, our flesh will fail us, and we will meet our undealt-with sin and our own weaknesses face to face. In those moments, we come face to face with our desperate need for Jesus.

Amazingly, He is there for us in those moments that are often corrupted by filth and wickedness.

And, remarkably, sometimes those failure moments are the most formative for believers – to finally come to a position of total reliance on Christ aside from our carefully fabricated routines, rules, and religion.

In those moments, we agree with Paul that it is better to have “no confidence in the flesh, worship God in the Spirit and rejoice in Christ,” and so truly prove to be God’s people as He makes us into His likeness (Phil 3:3).

Not a few new believers, having come joyfully and hopefully to the cross of Christ, have been crushed by the ensuing weight of “dos and don’ts” pressed upon them by “well-meaning” disciple-makers. May God forgive us for that. May we present to the world the gospel in its purity, simplicity, and freedom and the promises thereof.

Christ has made you free. Be free.

CHAPTER 10 | COLOSSIANS 3:1–11

In chapter 2, Paul (and Timothy) begin to transition from the theoretical, theological treatment of Christ toward the practical living out of that theology, a term sometimes referred to in academia as *praxis*.

In this way, we find that the remainder of Colossians focuses primarily on practical Christian living and is carried forward by all of the Christological momentum that Paul has to this point been amassing.

Recall that Paul has spent his time so far properly framing and anchoring the faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, keeping Christ at the center.

Sadly, and all too often, the material is presented the other way around. We tend to focus mainly on the imperatives, the “how” to live life, the “what to do” and “what not to do,” rather than “why” we live the way we do.

Many preachers spend most of their time focusing on the supposed “right way to live” rather than the presentation of life itself, Jesus Christ.

That is certainly attractive – just give the people the practicalities and let the theology stay on the shelf. But that wasn't Paul's way, and it's not the way of Scripture. Understanding Jesus and participation or communion with His person produces the fruits of righteousness that we so long for.

There are some crucial linkages between the beginning of chapter 3 and Paul's previous discourse on participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ found in Col 2. This is the context for our understanding of Paul's further instruction.

Let us review the transitional path, as it is beautifully structured, with lovely parallels carried throughout the letter.

In Col 2:12, Paul asserts that the Colossians had participated in the *death* and *resurrection* of Christ as expressed through their baptism.

In Col 2:20, Paul indicates that they are to resist the draw toward legalism, a works-based religion, based on their previous participation in Christ's *death*.

Now in Col 3:1, Paul offers up instruction on the ramifications of participating in Christ's *resurrection*, along with all of its ethical force.⁸⁹

We came to the conclusion previously (Col 2:16–23) that abstaining from certain behaviors or obligating ourselves to certain behaviors cannot commend us to God. Only the body and blood of Christ have the power to do that.

Paul now presents to the Colossians the balancing truth that the result of our participation in the death and resurrection of Christ is a focus on “things which are above, not on things on the earth” (Col 3:1–2).

And what are those things that are above?

Interestingly enough, Paul issues this command to “set your mind on things above” and then spends the rest of this letter instructing the Colossians on practical Christian living.

From here, Paul jumps off into the living out of our faith in such areas as relationships, marriage, personal conduct, holiness, parenting, evangelism, etc.

V. 1–2 | These key verses, connected with the centrality and headship of Christ over all things, frame for us the remainder

⁸⁹ Alford, *Greek Testament*, 231.

of the book, wherein Paul lays out the practical living evidenced in the lives of the saints.

Because we are citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20), where our Lord is seated at the right hand of the Father, our lives are then to be representative of that truth. People on the outside looking in can tell a little about where we're from because of how we live.

For example, several years ago, my wife and I traveled to France to visit the D-Day beaches at Normandy. We intentionally chose conservative clothing, nothing that screamed, "I'm an American," as we Americans are famous for across the globe. We arrived at the somber grounds, and what did we see – a lady wearing cargo shorts, tennis shoes, and a garish t-shirt emblazoned with the logo of a well-known college football team! We knew immediately that she was an American, **and** we could even make an assumption about which state she was from!

Well, as Paul writes to the Colossians, he speaks of things that identify us as believers, citizens of heaven, and sojourners living abroad on this earth.

Peter affirms this when he writes:

Dear friends, I warn you as "temporary residents and foreigners" to keep away from worldly desires that wage

war against your very souls. Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world (1 Pet 2:11–12).

How we telegraph our citizenship isn't born out of contrivance but sincere devotion. Others can tell which kingdom we belong to, not by which holidays we observe, the foods we eat or don't eat, the drinks we drink or don't drink, nor the clothes we wear (Col 2:16; 21).

Our heavenly citizenship is made evident not in how we look but in how we live. And how we live is the result of the re-shaping of our mind, a reorientation, an elevating of our minds!

Consider the urgency of Paul exhorting the Colossians repeatedly in verses 1 and 2 to focus on the “those things which are above.”

Respected Bible scholar James Dunn writes, “This underscores the point... that what is commended is not an apocalyptic or mystical preoccupation with the furniture of heaven, as 3:1 could be taken to imply... but a cast of mind, a

settled way of looking at things, a sustained devotion to and enactment of a life cause.”⁹⁰

The previous context of the book brings us into agreement with Dr. Dunn’s interpretation. Previously Paul warned the Colossians against mysticism found in the worship of angels, and he also warned them against being bound by earthly rules and religious requirements, “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.”

The force then of Paul’s writing here is to declare that the faith upon which the church is founded far surpasses any contrived human religion or obsession with mysticism and demands that we set our focus on higher things. And, furthermore, the evidence of our heavenly focus **is** born out here on earth!

Historically, some have seen Paul’s command to “set your mind on things above” (along with other NT exhortations to holiness) as an invitation to monasticism, or a narrow-sighted Christianity, choosing not to engage in the world for fear of being spoiled by it. In that regard, some Christians have been accused of being “so heavenly-minded that they’re no earthly good.”

⁹⁰ Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 205.

Let us not lose our balance. Following Jesus is not a call to withdraw, cloister, or form a “holy huddle,” but to represent the Lord in our world fearlessly because of our heavenly hope.

Remember, Jesus taught that the saints are salt and light in the present age (Matt 5:13–14). He taught them, and us, to pray that God’s will would be accomplished and His kingdom would be established here on earth – just as it is in heaven (Matt 6:10; Luke 11:2). He also taught the disciples a precept to be carried forward as the church came together: to be servants in our world (John 13:12–15); to endure to the end (Matt 10:22); and to preach the gospel, make disciples, and teach (Mark 16:15; Matt 28:19–20). These are all things that the saints are to be concerned with here and now *exactly because* we have set our minds on things above.

The reality for Christians is that we can’t come close to being any earthly good for the kingdom *unless* we are heavenly-minded.

V. 3 | Paul comments on the state of the Colossian believers, recognizing that by identifying in Christ’s death, they have entered into a state of unity with the Son *in* the Father.

Jesus’ “High-Priestly Prayer” illustrates this truth: “And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be

one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:22–23).

This carries forward a central NT theme and one that Paul has already addressed in Colossians: dying to self.

Participating in Christ includes putting to death the old person, dying to self, as it were (Matt 16:24; Rom 6:2, 11; 1 Cor 15:31; Gal 2:20).

For those of us who have shared in Christ’s death, our lives are “hidden with Christ in God,” which is quite a cryptic teaching. The language holds within its range of meaning the idea of keeping something safe.⁹¹

The NLT helps with understanding: “For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.”

From the unsaved world’s perspective, there is much about the Christian life that smacks of lifelessness.

Consider just how the teachings of Jesus are scorned. Who would choose to live a life of self-denial, servitude, caring

⁹¹ “κρύπτω; ὑπερασπίζω (a figurative extension of meaning of ὑπερασπίζω ‘to hold a shield over,’ not occurring in the NT): to cause to be safe or protected by hiding, in some contexts with the intent of not being found—‘to keep safe, to cause to be protected, to protect, to hide.’” Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 239.

more for others than themselves, washing feet, caring for the poor, the hungry, the widows and orphans, preaching the gospel, or making disciples? And, to address our modern image-driven culture, who would do all of that without a market-driven agenda? Only losers!

Consider that in Paul's day, publicly identifying oneself as a Christian carried with it the risk of very real physical violence, denial of work, starvation, exclusion from society, etc. To be a Christian meant giving up one's life.

Conditions for Christians aren't as extreme in the Western culture, but certainly, this is still a very real likelihood for the persecuted church across the globe.

In our current Western context, marked by hipster churches, influencer churches, and social media hype churches, we've all convinced ourselves that we are too cool for school, and we're all just affirming one another's greatness inside the walls. But we are too scared to go outside and mingle with the sinners. We would do well to remember the lyrics of John Foreman, who poignantly sang:

We are a beautiful letdown
Painfully uncool
The church of the dropouts
The losers, the sinners, the failures, and the fools.

And that's how the world views the church for the most part, along with much skepticism.

Don't let that surprise you: "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before [it hated] you" (John 15:18).

The true hidden beauty, the glory of the saints, is reserved with Christ. Presently, and for the foreseeable future, we may get a bunch of confused looks by the unconverted who believe we are deluded, insane, foolish, "painfully uncool" for not pursuing a so-called "vibrant" worldly existence. Instead, we look forward to the revealing of our actual life, clothed with glory, alongside Jesus Christ.

N.T. Wright comments about this portion of Scripture:

There is a perfect balance here between the 'already' and the 'not yet' that are so characteristic of Paul's teaching on the Christian life. The new age has dawned, and Christians already belong to it. The old age, however, is not yet wound up, and until they die (or until the Lord 'appears' again in his second coming) their new life will be a secret truth, 'hidden' from view (from others, much of the time: often enough, from themselves too)... Paul, the prisoner, an eccentric Jew to the Romans and a worse-than-Gentile traitor to the Jews, will be seen as Paul the Apostle, the servant of the King. The Colossians,

insignificant ex-pagans from a third-rate country town, will be seen in a glory which, if it were now to appear, one might be tempted to worship. This is how they are to regard their life, and on this foundation they are to build genuine holiness and Christian maturity.⁹²

The Apostle John helps describe our future hope of glory along with the present demand for purity, further defining the “already but not yet” state of sanctification that the saints find themselves in:

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore, the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure (1 John 3:1–3).

Simplified: We **are** children of God; we **are not** recognized by our present world as particularly glorious; **but** we **shall** be like Him, sharing in His glory; until then, we **now** purify ourselves to share in Christ’s likeness.

⁹² Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 137.

V. 5 | Therefore, or so then, based upon the “already and not yet” of the gospel, our future perspective of glory, the knowledge of our heavenly citizenship, and the orientation of our mind on Christ’s kingdom, we bear fruit for Christ’s kingdom, for His glory.

That involves reinforcement of the idea of putting to death, or mortifying, those extensions of ourselves⁹³ that are still aligned with the ways of the world.

Remember, this is the idea of Christological momentum, that because of our relationship with Jesus, we are shaped into something else, something that resembles Him!

Paul then lists a number of sins that we may recoil at, but we need to keep in mind that he is writing **to Christians**. Clearly, this needed to be addressed, and praise the Lord for this everlasting exhortation to Christians across the ages, inscripturated for us. Unfortunately, some “believers” like to play fast and loose with their heavenly citizenship! God forbid!

The result of our heavenly citizenship is that, in response to God’s grace and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we cast away our deadness and sin and are continually shaped into Christ’s likeness.

⁹³ “μέλος” Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 93.

V. 6–7 | Paul demonstrates the dividing line between the saints and the “sons of disobedience,” the unbelievers.

The saints are found “with Christ in God,” while the children of disobedience who continue to cling to sexual immorality, evil desire, and idolatry born out of covetousness are under God’s wrath.

Please note that as Paul describes the wrath of God, his language is in the *present tense*.

In this verse, Paul is not referring to some distant, speculative, perchance judgment but rather describes God’s “strong displeasure, indignation, and retribution”⁹⁴ as occurring in their present time.

And then, Paul reminds the Colossians that this is where you came from, this is what you came out of.

This is a great reminder for all Christians!

Sometimes, after walking with the Lord, we forget where we came from – in the worst possible way. That can lead to arrogance, self-righteousness, and an unteachable heart/mind. It can also lead to legalism and entrapment to certain regulations (which Paul has already addressed).

⁹⁴ “ὄργη” Arndt, *Lexicon*, 720.

The point here is not to hurt the Colossians but to urge them to consider how far they've come, to hold fast to the Head, Jesus Christ; to continue in holiness; and to, perhaps, induce some humility in a church that was struggling with what to believe and how to worship.

Vv. 8–11 | A new ethic for a new people.

Years ago, while completing my MBA, I was required to take a course entitled “Business Ethics,” in which the first joke made by the professor was that the title of the course was itself an oxymoron!

One illustration raised for discussion was that in many developing countries, the ethics of business are often not the same. For example, business owners in these countries don't give a second thought to paying bribes to organized criminals or even political figures in order to ensure (and insure) their livelihood. Herein, we find that what is ethical is very often defined by the culture.

Not so with the gospel! The gospel carries with it an ethical force that propels the actions of the saints to live **as** Christ. This is important to remember for those who paint Paul as an unrestrained libertine who preached that anything goes

because of grace – a gross mischaracterization of Paul’s theology.⁹⁵

Paul gives these new believers very plain and simple instructions on what the resultant life of the saints looks like. (You can tell a tree by the fruit that it bears [Matt 7:17]!)

Christians are not characterized by the inner poison of anger, wrath, and malice and the outer manifestation of that poison, the overflow of the blackened heart: blasphemy, filthy language, and lying (Matt 12:34) *exactly because* we are new in Christ. We have put to death and cast away those wretched tendencies we once participated in as naturally as breathing.⁹⁶

This is the result of being renewed in the image of Christ – that we appear as He is (Rom 12:1–2; 1 John 4:17).

Finally, with an eye on v. 11, the point here isn’t primarily equity among different people groups in our treatment of one another. Instead, Paul is pointing out that whatever ethnicity one has identified with in their pre-Christ life has passed away.

Membership in any one demographic does not commend us to, nor restrict us from, Christ.

⁹⁵ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 145.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 146.

Christ is what matters over and above heritage, blood line, language, religious tradition, geography, race, and level of earthly freedom (slave or free!). **And** we can infer from Paul's list here that he had seen Christ work mightily in and among each of these differing groups.

It's clear to me that the work of Jesus Christ blew Paul's mind as he reflected upon the high office of our Lord; the result of His people being conformed to His image; the fact that Jesus was making one new people group – the church – out of many different groups; and that everywhere Christ's Spirit was moving among believers. The overwhelming result was holiness.

May we adopt this heart as well, as we shed those things that the Spirit convicts us are not part of our heavenly identity. May we lay aside any claim to the kingdom based on our own merit, our own heritage, and our own learning, and may we come to be renewed according to the image of Christ. For He is all and in all. Amen.

CHAPTER 11 | COLOSSIANS 3:12–13

In the preceding verses, Paul began to instruct the Colossians on the practical application of their lives in Christ. Since Christ is the center of our faith, then the results will be evident among His people by how we live.

Generally speaking, Col 3:1–11 deals with those things that we are to *put off*, or remove, from ourselves, since we are changed by Jesus when we set our minds on things above and participate in His death and resurrection (Col 3:1–4).

Paul's language is quite strong when it comes to dealing with the ugliness of sin that we so readily cling to and that were marks of our pre-converted selves:

Therefore, put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry... But now you yourselves are to *put off* all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds (Col 3:5, 8–9).

Moving forward, Paul encourages the church to adopt or “*put on*” the attributes of Christ as a result of that same spiritual change that causes Christians to let go of our ugliness.

So then, the result of communing with Jesus is a changed life by divesting ourselves of wickedness and clothing ourselves with Christ’s righteousness.

V. 12 | Paul continues to lay out this message of sanctification, growing in holiness, by employing a term that indicates a logical inference – “Therefore.”

Paul is saying that based on all that has already been set forth concerning dying to ourselves, putting to death our own sin, and sharing in Christ’s likeness, we are bound to take the next step in the process of being made holy, being made into the image of Christ.

But before we tackle the practicalities of holiness in Col 3 and 4, we must tarry for a bit at Paul’s language in v.12, since it bears significantly on one of the most divisive of Christian doctrines – the Doctrine of Election, sometimes referred to as Predestination.

Whether one agrees with this doctrine or not, well-respected theologian, Wayne Grudem, provides a succinct definition of the Doctrine of Election that serves as a good baseline for beginning a brief analysis of the subject: “Election is an act

of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.”⁹⁷

In our text, Paul prescribes to the Colossians several imperatives for their continuation in holiness, but first he describes them “as the elect of God.”

So then, if we are committed to interpreting the Bible consistently and faithfully, then we must admit that we can discern from the text at minimum that Paul believed, and recorded for all time as inspired by the Holy Spirit, the fact that God chose or elected this congregation and its members by His grace. They are chosen.⁹⁸ That much is certain.

Now, does the NT support this view of election in a more general sense outside of Colossians? While this is not about the finer points of Calvinism or Election, the short answer is, Yes.

For example:

Peter, an Apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the
Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and

⁹⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 670.

⁹⁸ “ἐκλεκτός ... pert[aining] to being selected, chosen gener[ally] of those whom God has chosen fr[om] the generality of mankind and drawn to himself.” Arndt, *Lexicon*, 306.

Bithynia, *elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father*, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied (1 Pet 1:1–2).

For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, *even the elect*.... And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other (Matt 24:24, 31).

Who shall bring a charge against *God's elect*? [It is] God who justifies (Rom 8:33).

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, *because God from the beginning chose you for salvation* through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth (2 Thes 2:13).

Therefore I endure all things *for the sake of the elect*, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory (2 Tim 2:10).

More substantially, Paul writes to the Ephesians:

[J]ust as *He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and without blame

before Him in love, *having predestined us to adoption* as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.... In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, *being predestined* according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph 1:4–5, 11).

So, does the Bible teach the Doctrine of Election? Yes. Is that hard for some people to grasp? Absolutely!

But are we more convinced by our own presuppositions and pre-understandings than by the very Word of God? Sometimes we are, and that's what makes it difficult for straight-line Calvinists and straight-line Arminians to come to a *balanced theology* acknowledging that the Scriptures teach both election by God and the responsibility of the saints to respond to God's grace.

J.I. Packer includes a record of an exchange in 1784 between two historic Christians at opposite ends of this debate, Charles Simeon and John Wesley. Charles Simeon records the account:

“Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin combat, with your permission I will ask you a few

questions... do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?" "Yes," says [John Wesley], "I do indeed." "And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?" "Yes, solely through Christ." "But, sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?" "No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last." "Allowing then that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?" "No." "What then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother's arms?" "Yes, altogether." "And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto his heavenly kingdom?" "Yes, I have no hope but in him." "Then sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance... and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things wherein we agree."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Intervarsity: Downers Grove, IL) 2008, 17–18.

Now just think, contextually, as Paul explains the result of participating in Christ's personhood to the Colossians. He tells them to die to themselves, mortify the deeds of the flesh, and live holy lives before God and presents to them both *correction* and *instruction*.

The inference then, at least partially, is that they didn't have all of their goodness perfectly nailed down; they were flawed believers still growing in holiness.

God didn't choose them because they chose to exercise their freewill and were remarkably good and holy. He chose them as an act of His freewill, in His grace, because He is good and holy, and He promised to make them like He is. The same holds true for us.

Viewed from this perspective, the Doctrine of Election fits perfectly well within orthodox Christian theology, elevating the grace of God and His will over and above mankind's.

All of that being set forth, we will not diverge too much from the text in pursuit of the Doctrine of Free Will since our text is not concerned with that argument; even as we acknowledge that the concept of human responsibility (free will) and an open invitation to "whosoever will" is also identifiable in Scripture (Mark 8:34; John 3:15–16; 4:10,14; 7:37; Rev 22:17)

As stated earlier, the point of the aforementioned discourse is not to parse all of the nuances of Calvinism or its counterpoints or alternate views but to recognize and acknowledge how God views the church and its members, as recorded in Holy Scripture – “as the elect of God, holy, and beloved.”

And since God has chosen His saints, then we do have a responsibility to follow His commands and to move to the sound of His voice and the direction of the Scriptures.

Election doesn't mean being ineffectual or unconcerned with others since you're either chosen or you're not.

We acknowledge that we are saved by God's grace and chosen by Him. Since we are chosen by God, seen as holy in His eyes by the blood of Christ, loved by Him despite our deficiencies, then we carry out His will with tenacity, endurance, and grit – looking for the others that God has called unto Himself but have yet to respond.

Paul writes to the Ephesians about the intersection of God's grace, His works that He has prepared for us that at some point in the past was unknown to us, and our own responsibility:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; [it is] the gift of God, not of works,

lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them* (Eph 2:8–10).

So how does this all bear out practically?

First, as the elect, the loved, the holy, we collectively (based on Paul’s use of the second-person, plural, imperative) dress ourselves in our Father’s clothes.¹⁰⁰ We have no interest in our own filthy rags (Isa 64:6), so we look to the Lord’s closet.

We adorn ourselves with tender mercies, which means “concern, sensitivity, compassion,” and as the name explicitly declares – mercy.

Remember, mercy is withholding judgment or condemnation, even if that condemnation and judgment may be justified. Mercy is choosing to forego wrath.

Paul’s word choice here¹⁰¹ really speaks to the internal condition of the believers at Colossae – they were supposed to have soft hearts and sensitive dispositions.

¹⁰⁰ Paul’s use of the second person, plural, imperative, Ἐνδύσασθε (*endusasthe*), indicates that the entire church body is “to put on and to wear clothes—‘to wear, to dress.’” Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 525.

¹⁰¹ σπλάγχνα οἰκτιροῦ (*splagkna oiktirmoi*) may be paraphrased as “sensitive guts” or “soft insides” or “tender hearted.”

Furthermore, they were to adorn themselves with kindness and humility.

Sometimes we would rather defend our shortcoming in this area by saying, “Well, I guess that’s just how God made me,” or appealing to Jesus’ righteous wrath, rather than admitting that those examples don’t serve us well at all. Instead, we are to place ourselves under the authority of Scriptures and allow ourselves to be shaped by it, even if that means repenting along the way.

There are quite a few Christians who need to conduct some self-reflection on the biblical imperative to be kind.

We can’t blame our character flaws, rudeness, and unkindness on the Lord and just claim that He made us to be prickly porcupines. The Scriptures tell a different story about what happens to people who are following after Jesus.

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *[to be] conformed to the image of His Son*, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren (Eph 2:8–10).

and

Therefore, if anyone [is] in Christ, [he is] a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2 Cor 5:17).

May the Lord forgive us when we try to explain away our unkindness and lack of humility. We are supposed to be like Him and become more like Him along the way. Additionally, we are to adopt the attributes and be robed in meekness and longsuffering.

The oft-cited, common definition of meekness is “power under control.” We love that definition; it allows us to feel powerful – even if we’re not. Nobody wants to admit they are not powerful.

BDAG, arguably the definitive lexicon on New Testament Greek and early Christian literature, defines the Greek word for “meekness” as “**the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance, gentleness, humility, courtesy, considerateness.**”¹⁰²

Furthermore, Louw and Nida present this term as “gentleness of attitude and behavior, in contrast with harshness in one’s dealings with others.... In a number of languages ‘gentleness’ is often expressed as a negation of harshness, so that ‘gentleness’ may often by (sic) rendered as ‘not being harsh with people,’ but gentleness may also be expressed in some instances in an idiomatic manner, for

¹⁰² “πρᾶξις,” Arndt, *Lexicon*, 861.

example, ‘always speaking softly to’ or ‘not raising one’s voice.’”¹⁰³

How does that jive with our notions of “power under control”? More so, how does it challenge our own temptation to be impressed by our own self-importance?

Longsuffering means exactly what it sounds like – to suffer long or be patient over the long term.

V. 13 continues to define God’s expectation of those who are elect, holy, and beloved so that they might bear with one another and forgive one another.

Who is the “one another”? The church! Paul is writing to the church in Colossae, and apparently they needed to be reminded that they were to bear with one another and forgive one another rather than employing the host of worldly, fleshly, and sometimes demonic (see James 3:14–18) options exercised by church members today, such as: bolting for the exit, creating divisions, tearing down the pastor and staff, tearing each other down, burning the whole place down (metaphorically speaking), or silently fading into obscurity because of hurt feelings and the felt need to stand up for ourselves and assert the primacy of our rights and privileges over and above others.

¹⁰³ “πρὸς ἄλλήλους,” Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 748.

So then, all of those attributes that we are to “put on” don’t apply **only** to the outside world but also inside the church. Mercy, kindness, soft hearts, meekness, humility, and patience – these are the things that we are to extend to our dearly loved family **inside** the church! Even when, or perhaps especially when, we find ourselves at odds with one another.

The attributes of Christ that we wear aren’t meant only to benefit us. They are meant to benefit those we come into contact with as we live life in the Body of Christ.

Forgiveness, that great Christian virtue, is also something we are to exercise freely in churches.

But, for a moment, let us consider how this fits together with reconciliation. Because what Paul sets forth here is **big!**

Consider what immediately comes to mind if we explore this clause: “if anyone has a complaint against another.”

What do we do? Well, many seasoned Christians immediately begin to consider the biblical instructions for believers in conflict with one another found in Matthew’s gospel:

Moreover if your brother *sins* against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that “by the mouth of two or

three witnesses every word may be established.” And if he refuses to hear them, tell [it] to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector (Matt 18:15–17).

Notice a few things.

1. It's on the offended party, not the offender, to initiate reconciliation.
2. It is not within the offended party's authority to exact retribution or punishment.

Look at Paul's writing in Colossians and let us reconcile these if we can. “If anyone (the offended party) **has a complaint** against another (the offender); even as Christ forgave you (the entire church at Colossae (2nd person, plural – y'all)) so you all must do.”

Forgiveness and reconciliation are the purposes of confrontation and church discipline within the Body.

The purpose of church discipline or confrontation is not primarily to make somebody apologize or put them in their place or foster an atmosphere of hyper-criticality in the Body.

Notice that Jesus' taught, "If your brother **sins** against you," so I would argue that it is wise to restrict our confrontations to matters of sin.

One could also make the argument that these instructions for confronting someone who has sinned against us or that we have a complaint against are actually to teach **the offended party** about forgiving others and being gracious and merciful more than bringing to light some grievance.

In Paul's instruction to the Colossians, he makes no provision for confrontation but simply leaves it at, "if you have a complaint against somebody else, forgive them like Jesus forgave you" (paraphrased, of course).

There's no multi-step plan in Paul's instructions, only a one-step plan – forgive.

Perhaps the entire point is to soften the offended person's heart toward others and teach them about the heart of Christ who forgave us, wretched as we are.

Let me show you what I mean. God had a complaint against us! Rightly so! We were filthy pagans, sons and daughters of the flesh, the world, and the devil.

But He extended His grace towards us. He forgave the Colossians. He forgives us. That forgiveness is simply

unmatchable, but we can model it here on earth if we would submit to God's Word and genuinely do the right thing!

All in all, what we see in these brief two verses is the face of Christ staring back at us, reminding us that we are to look like Him – chosen, holy, loved, merciful, kind, humble, meek, eternally patient, bearing with others, forgiving others.

These are not second-tier issues that maybe we'll get around to one day if we're not too busy figuring out Calvinism. This is the baseline: if you are a child of God, then this is how you will live.

This is the way of Jesus. This is what He has set us apart to be by His grace, His Spirit, and His Word.

CHAPTER 12 | COLOSSIANS 3:14–17

We are firmly in the midst of examining what it means to live a life centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In the preceding verses, we have received Paul’s exhortation to the church to cast away sin and put on the attributes of Jesus.

When reviewed in parallel, the difference between what we once were and what we are called to is quite striking (Col 3:5–8, 12–14).

Part of the message of the Scriptures is that God’s people, who respond to the gospel and are born again, will be changed from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to the power of God (Acts 26:18).

This change, wrought internally, permeates our members, both in an individual and collective (church-wide) sense and is revealed in how we live.

Consider this – the behaviors that we each act out on a daily basis have been massively influenced by our environment. This begins as soon as we are born. Almost immediately,

mothers and fathers begin to socialize their infants, even attempting to teach them how to speak.

Eventually, that bears fruit. Children grow and learn how to speak the language of their parents. They learn the social customs of their tribe and culture and adopt the accent not only of their parents but of those around them that they live with daily in school, church, or the world.

We are all very much the product of where we were raised and who we were raised by, and those traits are often identifiable by onlookers in very brief interactions – even if we have never met before.

Consider meeting somebody from the Midwest, New York City, the Deep South, or England. Each of these is identifiable not only by how they speak but by how they relate to the people and environment around them.

Several years ago, my family and I moved from Georgia to the Northwestern corner of Illinois – in February. During the trip, we stopped to refuel many miles north of the Deep South. There was snow on the ground, which was terrifying for me, having grown up in the South. The wind was whipping across the planes so tremendously that I thought I might die pumping gas. I wondered how people could even

survive this kind of frigid weather! But to the people who lived there, the wind and the cold were no big deal.

Now, while I thought I had adequately equipped myself, I soon discovered that I was woefully unprepared. Upon arriving at our new home and getting plugged into a church, we met the pastor and his family. One of the first things he said to me after seeing how I dressed for the cold was, “You need a new coat.”

He was right. And what we find in Paul’s instructions to the Colossians here in chapter 3 is similar – you need a new coat! All praise to the Lord Jesus Christ who has provided us with just such garments!

But, a word of warning, a word of encouragement – once we put on these new garments, people will begin to notice that “you’re not from around here.”

As we dress ourselves in Christ’s righteousness and adopt His ways, we find that blending in becomes quite impossible when we have adopted the manner of speaking, living, and caring for others like the Lord Jesus.

Before Jesus, we **were** children of darkness and wrath, subject to the governor of that realm, Satan (Eph 2:3; 1 Cor 6:9–11, Col 3:6–7).

Not surprisingly, before we were born again and found new life in the Son, we behaved in a manner indicative of our upbringing – spiritually speaking – and where we were from was undoubtedly not a surprise to anybody we came into contact with.

In this chapter, Paul has offered up the garments that the saints are to wear: mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness (Col 3:12–13).

These are all things that we espouse as followers of Jesus. But, if we're being honest, these are also things that are exceedingly difficult to master or produce in our own power, most likely because we don't allow ourselves to be fully mastered by the Lord Jesus.

Nevertheless, Paul's instructions on the matter are an encouragement to holiness, not a rebuke for being incomplete.

His instructions are to **put on** Christ's likeness, His attributes, to be clothed in them.

V. 14 | In our text, Paul presents to the Colossians the final, central piece of the Christian wardrobe – love.

As a matter of fact, the text indicates to us that love is over all other attributes and binds all of those things together,

drawing together under its primacy all of the other godly qualities that we gain in Christ.

This is not surprising to us, but it must be noted that the Christian community's (the church's) high regard for godly love is unique in itself.¹⁰⁴

And yet, we have found so many other things that we often desire to push to the forefront of our cause, our image, and our care; but that one central attribute – love – is to be eminently clear in the life of the saints.

Jesus' words, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another," are always a timely reminder for each of us; they often bring conviction and a sense of re-centering that we desperately need (John 13:35).

Love is the drum beat of the Grand Narrative of Scripture. From creation, through the election of Israel, God's forbearance and His divine judgment in the OT, the gift of the Law and the Prophets, the giving of a Messiah, the call to discipleship, Christ's substitutionary death, the resurrection, the gift of the Spirit, the gift of the Apostles, the NT writings, all the way to Christ's imminent return – all of these (and far more) are rooted in love in one way or another.

¹⁰⁴ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 147.

Matthew's gospel reinforces the idea of the centrality of love:

But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. Then one of them, a lawyer, asked [Him a question], testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which [is] the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is [the] first and great commandment. And [the] second [is] like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 22:34–40).

So, a supposedly strait-laced, morally good, educated, religious community seeks to draw Jesus onto theologically contentious grounds by asking Him to prioritize God's Word, revealing their own dark hearts in the process.

His response to them is remarkable because Jesus identifies the unifying thread of the Scriptures – love for God and love for others.

Jesus asserts that the culmination of the OT Scriptures is found in these two loves: Vertical love for God, and horizontal love for people.

The NT certainly carries forward that idea, as the Apostle John writes:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son [to be] the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:7–11).

So then, it is no surprise that God's New Covenant people are to be a people of love. **And** we are to be recognized **for** our love.

As Paul writes, we are to wear love over all the other godly attributes that we are adorned with (mercy, patience, kindness, forgiveness, etc.) as the thing that makes our saintly garments complete or perfect – individually and collectively.

V. 15 | Further outlining the marks of God's people, Paul exhorts the Colossians to be ruled by God's peace from within.

As we consider our world and our individual contexts, we know that chaos abounds in the world. Stress, anxiety,

depression, fear, insecurity, and instability are common across the globe.

This ought not surprise us. Jesus taught the disciples on the night of His betrayal, “These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Our peace is supplied by Christ, not by the world.

This is where so many believers go off the rails – seeking to improve their earthly circumstances in search of inconsistent, unreliable peace that is offered to them by the world rather than by resting in the eternal peace of God that rules from within.

Wonderfully, we see that this abiding peace within our hearts is for the church as a whole, too.

While we do have that personal peace that comes from following Jesus and that He has gifted to us (at least theoretically), we, as a church, are **called** to submit ourselves as a community to the peace of God that is found at the core of our being. And in doing so, we are also called to be thankful.

Paul's encouragement to the church here is difficult for us to grasp sometimes. We live in an age of strategizing, developing, pushing, moving, and shaking. We sometimes convince ourselves that if we stop pushing, we will be left behind and found ineffective or obsolete.

Rather than pursuing peace (Rom 14:19; 2 Tim 2:2; 1 Pet 3:11; Heb 12:14), we sometimes pursue and propagate an attitude of frantic busyness in an attempt to convince others that we have more momentum or are getting more accomplished than we actually are. What we see then, from many areas within Christendom, is a whole lot of movement and noise, beating the war-drum, but not a whole lot of the peace that Jesus promised would abide within His followers.

The author of Hebrews reminds us: "Pursue peace with all [people], and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14).

V. 16 | We come upon a rare portion of Scripture.

To our eyes, we believe we've seen this or at least heard this a thousand times, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."

Surprisingly, this specific phrase "[the word of Christ]" occurs only here in the New Testament (in qualified form in

Heb. 6:1), but ‘the word of the Lord’ (1 Thes. 1:8; 2 Thes. 3:1; Acts 8:25; 12:24, etc.) is equivalent.”¹⁰⁵

Also, note that the direct object of Paul’s imperative, the “you” that Paul is referring to, is not a singular person but the church as a whole.

It is important to remember the collective nature of Paul’s instructions as we move through this. While Paul’s teachings have a bearing on us as individuals, the main force, at least from Paul’s perspective, is toward the church as a whole.

And what a needful reminder this is – to keep the Word of the Lord at the center of our church and ourselves! The gospel of Jesus Christ is the main thing!¹⁰⁶

As we keep the Word of Christ, the gospel, at the center, and as we allow it to take up residence at the core of all of our activities, we will handle that Word with wisdom and be moved by it in our worship.

¹⁰⁵ Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 236.

¹⁰⁶ “As such [the word of Christ] ... can denote both the word (gospel) of which (the) Christ is the content (so most; “the mode of Christ’s presence in the community,” Wolter 189), and the word which (the) Christ spoke (Jesus tradition); there is no reason why the genitive form should be pressed to an either-or decision (either objective or subjective).” Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 236.

F.F. Bruce remarks, “If wisdom or tact be absent, the instruction, however well intentioned, could provoke the opposite reaction to that which is designed.”¹⁰⁷

As we are moved by the Word of Christ, we see that the results it has on our interactions with one another are found in teaching and admonishing one another.

There is an instructional aspect of handling the gospel in wisdom that lends itself to educating the unlearned and correcting or giving counsel to those who need to be corrected in their behavior or thinking.¹⁰⁸

But before we latch onto the desire to be the crusading corrector in our churches, we need to pay attention to the method by which Paul allows for such teaching and correction – “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing **with grace** in your hearts to the Lord” (Eph 5:19–20).

So, there doesn’t appear to be any license for vicious spiritual decapitations, but a singsong, *grace-filled*, poetic counsel and

¹⁰⁷ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 158.

¹⁰⁸ The Greek term behind the English “admonishing” is *νουθετέω* and means, “to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct.” Arndt, *Lexicon*, 679.

encouragement exercised as a church toward one another from a peaceful heart.

We find then that instead of the hyper-focused personal attacks aimed at individuals by preachers who are searching for sermon material, church members receive teaching, admonition, and encouragement from the Word and worship we are engaged in together when we are simply part of the church and sitting under the declaration of the Word of Christ! What a sweet thought!

N.T. Wright suggests that “the church is to be stocked with good teaching as a palace is filled with treasures. The teaching is to be with all wisdom: the ‘word’ concerns Christ, Wisdom himself (2:3, etc.), and will be characterized by wisdom in the teachers. This ministry of teaching and admonishing is to be part of a life of thankfulness that overflows into song.”¹⁰⁹

Notably, commentators believe that Paul’s instructions here give us a glimpse into early Christian worship – focused on the Word and overflowing with congregational singing.¹¹⁰ Beautifully, these are the marks of Christ-centered worship today and have been for nearly two thousand years.

¹⁰⁹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 148–149.

¹¹⁰ Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 236.

V. 17 | Paul wraps up his instructions on the spirit of Christian worship, and he has presented a lot of spiritual and practical instruction! He has written about shunning evil, choosing good, the attitude of believers, the heart of believers being ruled by peace, and the Word of the Lord.

Now, he gives a broad command – whatever you do or say, do so in Jesus’ name.

Notice that Paul places their speech and actions on equal footing. What we say **and** how we live matters, and both of those things are to be for Jesus’ sake.

We are to be ever mindful that we belong to Jesus’ body and that we have been changed. As a result of that change, we are new, and our speech and actions are to reflect that change of allegiance, not out of contrivance but out of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Oh, how different our lives, our ministries would be if we were ever mindful that it’s all for Jesus and all in His name, by His power, by His Spirit.

We are reminded for the second time in three verses that as we go about living this out in real time that we are people of gratitude, thanking God for all that He is, for His grace and mercy toward us, for the holy clothing He has provided to us,

and for allowing us to participate in this holy institution – His church – through Jesus Christ.

These instructions are not earth-shattering. They're not new, novel, or groundbreaking theological discoveries.

An old adage about theological teachings says, “If it’s new, it ain’t true.” While that saying is undoubtedly reductionist, there is some truth to it.

We are part of an ancient faith that is never irrelevant. While these attitudes and behaviors that we are called to in one Body may challenge the world around us, we continue to hold fast to what we have received through the Word of Christ.

This is simply the faithful and historic declaration of how we saints are to live out our lives toward God and one another, through Jesus Christ, because we have been changed by Him.

This is a message that we’ve heard a thousand times before, and yet it is a message that we will need to hear a thousand times more as we follow Jesus.

Help us to live this out, Lord.

CHAPTER 13 | COLOSSIANS 3:18–19

V. 18 | We come, now, upon a verse much dreaded by Bible teachers everywhere – “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”

The task of expounding upon this text is sometimes avoided by pastors and Bible teachers who are uncomfortable asking wives to wrestle with the Scriptures on their own terms.

What we find then in our modern era is that sometimes people seek to soften this message or offer up speculative contextualization in order to absolve believing wives, Jesus followers, of their responsibility to God’s Word.

The word that Paul uses for “submit” here is, “ὑποτάσσω [and means] to cause to be in a submissive relationship, to subject, to subordinate... in the sense of voluntary yielding in love.”¹¹¹ And “to bring something under the firm control of someone—‘to subject to, to bring under control.’”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Arndt, *Lexicon*, 1042.

¹¹² Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 475.

Blessedly, we have committed ourselves to teaching through the whole counsel of God, not skipping over any parts of the Holy Scriptures even if they make us uncomfortable.

Truth be told, there are many portions of Scripture that make us uncomfortable since they shine a spotlight on those areas of our lives where we are more prone to seek human approval and concurrence rather than submitting to God's Holy Word and allowing ourselves to be shaped by it, trusting that He is true and good, But perhaps those uncomfortable portions of Scripture are especially needful to us as we desire to be shaped into His image.

Let us remember that the entirety of this epistle is grounded in the centrality of Christ. So then, this verse, as outdated as it may sound to our modern ear, is not to be viewed in a vacuum but as shaped by the will of the Lord Jesus and His example for all of us.

We should note up front that this command for wives to willingly place themselves under the authority of their husbands is not a one-off random verse that we can easily dismiss, as some may desire.

This repeated imperative for wives is noted throughout the NT letters and appears to be not necessarily so much a first-century cultural phenomenon that we can explain away, but

actually part and parcel of sound doctrine regarding the function and roles of wives and husbands within a Christian family (1 Cor 11:3; Eph 5:22; 1 Peter 3:1).

Now, as we wrestle with how much of this we should buy into, it is interesting to think that many people believe that the church is one of the best places to receive instruction on marriage and family relationships (at least Christians ought to think so). But we wouldn't typically classify this command to wives as the icebreaker we would use to draw people into our marriage seminars.

Nobody is going to plaster this verse on a billboard because it rubs people the wrong way!

Take heart, this common NT teaching regarding marriage roles is abused by Christians and unbelievers alike because it is so misunderstood. We will endeavor to understand what's going on here and so hope to avoid the abuses and wrong inferences that people sometimes make.

When this particular verse directed at wives is presented in isolation, apart from the gospel, apart from grace, and apart from the verses that immediately precede it, it becomes easy to mischaracterize the heart of the message – and many have used that to their advantage for many nefarious schemes.

So let us review the verses immediately preceding v.18:

But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, [do] all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Col 3:14–17).

Unfortunately, ignoring this context, many have used the NT teaching of the Apostles to baselessly diminish the role of women in society altogether.

Some have used this instruction regarding orderly marriage relationships to accuse the church of being misogynist.

Some have pointed to these instructions to promote the ugly narrative that women are second-class citizens in Christ's kingdom and the church, who don't have a true "seat at the table."

Some have even used this teaching to slander the Apostle Paul's personal reputation and accuse him of being a woman-hater.

Still others have tried to obscure the clarity of this brief verse by claiming that society and contemporary culture ought to drive marriage roles rather than the Bible.

They see this command more as an outdated, obsolete suggestion that Christian women aren't really bound to.

All of these are wrong representations of the message.

Contextually speaking, the Apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, commands these believing wives (not women as a whole group) to do something difficult – to place themselves under the authority of somebody else – somebody that these wives would know all too well, their husbands, and to do so for the sake of, and as an act of worship toward, the Lord Jesus.

Now, while that may be surprising to some, consider that the Bible asks all of us to do things that are supremely difficult – die to ourselves, sin no more, consider others better than ourselves, take the place of a servant, etc.

We are **all** commanded to subjugate our own desires and will for the sake of others – **all the time!** And in doing so, we are assured that by behaving in that manner, we are reflecting the nature and character of Jesus Christ.

Paul writes about this in Phil 2:

[Let] nothing [be done] through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, [and] coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to [the point of] death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:3–8).

This demonstrates what one commentator calls the Functional Subordination¹¹³ displayed by Christ.

Christ, being in all respects one with the Father – equal in glory, authority, power, God of God – subordinated Himself, submitting to the will of the Father for the sake of us, His lessers.

So too wives are called to exemplify that living parable in their own lives and by such actions to speak louder than any sermon ever could regarding the heart of Jesus and the unity of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

¹¹³ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 312.

Paul is more descriptive regarding the purpose of the role that wives are called to when he issues instructions concerning marriage in Ephesians 5: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so [let] the wives [be] to their own husbands in everything” (Eph 5:22–24).

So then, the glorious role of wives is to serve as an individual, personalized, living, breathing example of the church – the Bride of Christ.

This isn’t just Paul trying to sugarcoat a hard scriptural command for wives. Husbands have a difficult call as well. However, Paul explains that his teaching on the roles of the wives (and husbands) is what he calls “a great mystery,” meant to reflect the great mystery of Christ and His bride, the church (Eph 5:32).

His language indicates that there is something heavenly, spiritual, mysterious about our marriages for creation to gaze upon and witness and that the main point is that Christian marriage is intended to illustrate the union of Jesus Christ and the church that He purchased with His blood.

And who is the head of the church? Jesus Christ. And we, His church, willingly submit to His authority for His glory, endeavoring to understand the cost to Christ and to those who are called by His name.

I would argue that the purpose of marriage is wrapped up in broadcasting the message of Christ and the church to onlookers over and above any other perceived purpose.

Furthermore, as F.F. Bruce explains, “It is not suggested here or anywhere else in the NT that the woman is naturally or spiritually inferior to the man, or the wife to the husband.”¹¹⁴

Women served prominently in Christ’s earthly ministry; they served as deaconesses in the early church. It is believed that a woman by the name of Phoebe carried Paul’s letter to the Roman church. A husband-and-wife couple, Priscilla and Aquilla, served the Lord together and were a great help to the infant first-century church (Rom 16:1–4).

We also know that Paul affirmed the essential equality of all humans under the grace of God: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

¹¹⁴ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 164.

We all have a role to play, and God's Word tells us what those roles are and what they are not.

At some point, we all must come face to face with the Scriptures and accept them as holy and good, even as they challenge our conceptions of fairness. We must answer the question: Do I really believe all of this, or not?

My prayer is that hopefully, the answer is yes, we believe, and no matter what it costs us, we will follow the words of the Lord Jesus, trusting that He is teaching us about who He is through our discomfort, through our hard-learned humility, through our service to one another.

Remember, the Bible isn't primarily about hyper-personalized human application; it is the revelation of God to His people. So, even in the instructions on how we are to live as Christians, it's not so much about establishing a moral pattern where we fall in line or get left behind but more about teaching us who our God is.

Finally, before proceeding to the duties of husbands, I want to address the sometimes-adversarial relationship that people attempt to incite through these verses.

The question is this: "Who's in charge? Who leads in the home? Who leads in the church?" First and foremost, as Paul

has labored so tenaciously throughout this letter to explain, Christ is the Head.

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence (Col 1:18).

And let us not forget, as Jesus instructed his disciples about competing for headship:

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them.... But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:24–27).

We are supposed to be different on purpose – not like the world! We are all supposed to be servants rather than competing with each other for the top spot. We are not to be self-serving or self-promoting but looking out for the interests of others.

How much sweeter is it when we can serve our spouses in the Lord’s name and in His Spirit, and we can help them to fully follow the Lord Jesus as He has called them to.

As noted earlier, Paul's instructions are not for women in general but specifically for the marriage relationship. And while some go too far by emphasizing the "*own* husband" in an attempt to infer that the Colossian women had a problem submitting to their true husbands while deferring to other men, the text does not indicate that is the case. Nor does it mean, wives, that you can be a monster to everybody else in the church or your life because you're not married to them! Nor does it excuse rebelling against church leadership or other authorities that the Bible commands all of us to obey.

The requirements for all men and women who profess to follow Jesus to submit to one another as unto the Lord and to submit to the institutions that God has established are found throughout the NT.

While our text is focused on proper relationships within a family context, we find references to how we are to relate to leadership in a church context in Heb 13:17 and 1 Thes 5:12–13 and to governing authorities in a societal context in Titus 3:1, Rom 13:1–3, and 1 Pet 2:13–14.

All of that is not to establish some rigid power structure to dominate one another or create a top-down management system but because we are a people of peace established by the gospel. We are to pursue peace with all people and right relationships that demonstrate the gospel, just as much to one

another within the church as to those who are unbelievers that we are hoping to win by our conduct (Heb 12:14; 1 Pet 3:1–2).

V. 19 | Paul lays out the chief marital responsibility of husbands – love your wives and do not be bitter toward them.

Incidentally, I believe there is a lesson in the brevity we find here in Colossians regarding the roles of wives and husbands. How my soul desires to declare these two commands in their simplicity and let us work out what they mean – though it be with much tossing and turning and much repentance too!

However, our culture demands that we give an answer for these peculiarities of our faith, and we should contend earnestly for the faith and be ready to give an answer to all (1 Pet 3:15; Jude 1:3).

Looking at Paul’s more detailed marriage instructions to the Ephesians, the command that he issues to husbands is big!

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought

to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself (Eph 5:25–28).

Is there a husband on planet earth who perfectly loves his wife as Christ loves the church? Is there a husband who perfectly loves his wife as Christ loves her? Probably not. But there are many who are following close after Jesus and are getting closer every day, to the great benefit of their wives, spurred on by their own wives fulfilling their roles as they pursue the Lord in unity together!

Much has been said about the cause and effect, the give and take of biblical marriage roles.

Questions abound. Is the wife supposed to be properly submissive before her husband loves her as Christ? Or is it the other way around?

I would argue that, as Christ loved the church first, so then husbands are to love their wives in the grace of Jesus Christ first, without exception or condition. That is how Jesus loves the church!

When we are a rebellious wild bride, Jesus loves first, bearing with us! It is by His love that we are drawn to Him, grow to know Him, and place ourselves under His headship trusting in His care, His judgment, and His leading.

In this way, we learn who submits first in a marriage. First, husbands submit themselves to Christ! They learn to live out His ways, caring for their wives as their own selves.

For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord [does] the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife [see] that she respects [her] husband (Eph 5:29–33).

Here we see that the foundational tenets of a godly marriage are wrapped up in the relationship that Jesus has with His bride, the church – a relationship marked by complete unity, interdependence, and connectedness. Two become one and are of the same substance.

As a word of caution, most Christian marriages that go off the rails do so because one spouse or the other, or both, are failing to submit to the Lord Jesus and obey His Word. And that is truly heartbreaking.

All can be summed up in these two duties: wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord, and husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them.

Teach us, Lord, to understand and to submit to you first. Teach us the hard things. Forgive us for where we have abused your words for our own selfish gain, and teach us to love as you love us.

CHAPTER 14 | COLOSSIANS 3:20–21

Having spent the previous two very brief verses on the relationship between wives and husbands, Paul now turns his pen toward children and parents.

In fact, this final section of Colossians 3:18–4:1 is composed of practical instructions focused on three types of relationships: wives and husbands, children and parents, and servants (slaves) and masters.

Paul reminds the church that no matter what our station in life is, we are people of God first, and our primary relational responsibilities are founded upon a right relationship with the Lord Jesus and expressed toward others.

As we consider Paul's instructions to these different groups of people, allowing for overlap among them, we see how they are reflective of the person and work of Jesus Christ. And, regarding the text under consideration in vv. 20–21, these instructions are reflective of the Father.

The basic, applicational idea that applies across time and all Christian demographics is that our relationships with others are supposed to be emblematic of how God relates to His people and we to him.

The first group we turn our attention to is children.

V. 20 | Think about how significant it is that the Apostle Paul directly addresses children as a group in this letter. These instructions to children parallel his writing to the saints in Ephesus.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise: “that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth” (Eph 6:1–3).

We can infer a few things from our text and Paul’s instructions to the Ephesian children. The first is that the first-century church apparently welcomed kids into their gatherings. These letters were read and shared among the various churches meeting from place to place, and Paul’s direct address to children is significant. They were there! Children and families met as one body to worship together.

The second inference is that age is not the main factor in Christian responsibility!¹¹⁵ Children are capable of understanding, believing, and living out the gospel. Some might even argue that they are more capable of those things than adults.

¹¹⁵ Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 250.

Consider Jesus' interaction with children in Mark 10:

Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought [them]. But when Jesus saw [it], He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." And He took them up in His arms, laid [His] hands on them, and blessed them (Mark 10:13–16).

Sadly, as a universal church, we have become too comfortable tucking our kids away into neat little enclaves so that we are not distracted in our meetings. Not only have we become comfortable with it, but we also now see the partitioning of adults by age and interest.

I understand the practical arguments for that. I understand that a well-staffed, well-supplied, well-cared-for Children's ministry has become essential for families with children. And we want to do our very best to care for others' children just like Jesus would.

Part of that is allowing them to be present, to hear the words of Jesus plainly, and to keep ourselves from interfering with their meeting Jesus.

But in a unified gathering of the church, these children of believing families are commanded to obey their parents in all things. I imagine that Moms and Dads across the Colossian church were shouting almighty hallelujahs across the congregation! Perhaps nudging their kids, saying, “Did you hear that?”

The encouragement to these children is that obedience is pleasing to the Lord. Jesus takes pleasure in obedience. But, what is obedience? Following instructions. Louw and Nida define the terminology that Paul employs here as “to obey on the basis of having paid attention.”¹¹⁶

Learning obedience is an important part of the Christian life, best learned in our childhood.

Proverbs is just one of the places in Scripture that captures the importance of children learning obedience:

Whoever curses his father or his mother, His lamp will be put out in deep darkness (Pro 20:20).

The eye [that] mocks [his] father, And scorns obedience to [his] mother, The ravens of the valley will pick it out, And the young eagles will eat it (Pro 30:17).

¹¹⁶ Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 467.

This is a dramatic way to present the plain truth that learning rebelliousness, disobedience, and disrespect leads to hardship and destruction.

Society clearly attests to this truth. Kids who were never raised to understand the value of obedience often end up impulsive, self-centered, and chaotic adults. Sadly, some of these children, through the failure of their parents, end up incarcerated, wounded, used, chewed up, and spit out by a world laden with sin and bad intentions.

There's a saying that captures this sentiment for parents from Pastor Sandy Adams of Calvary Chapel Stone Mountain: "Raise your children and spoil your grandchildren; spoil your children and raise your grandchildren."

So severe was the OT understanding of the rebellious heart that children (presumably older children) who cursed their parents were condemned to death.

For everyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death. He has cursed his father or his mother. His blood [shall be] upon him (Lev 20:9).

That's heavy! When we consider that, we wonder, Is there hope for any of us? **And** what we find is that there is more to this command for children to obey their parents than just meets the eye.

Yes, it is good for children to learn obedience to their parents but not just to learn to be mindless cogs who don't question anything. Instead, it is to make their hearts soft toward the voice and commands of their heavenly Father and to be a help rather than a hindrance to their neighbors. Remember that the entire Law is summed up in the commands to love God and love others. That holds true for the laws that deal with family relationships.

And all of us, having been children at one time or another, fall under the same application. Are we, as God's children, listening for His commands? Are we obedient to Him? Or are we rebellious, scornful children who think we know better than our heavenly Father but in reality are just waiting for our scornful eye to be plucked out?

This demands some self-examination because we are all children of God if we call ourselves disciples.

As the author of Hebrews writes: "Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected [us], and we paid [them] respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?" (Heb 12:9)

Beautifully, I think the Apostle John does the best job conveying how God sees us as he repeatedly addresses the

saints in his letters as “little children,” echoing the language of Jesus from John 13 (1 John 2:1, 12, 18, 28; 3:7; 4:4; 5:21).

Draw near to your heavenly Father, little children, hear His voice, learn from Him, learn obedience. Parents, learn how to teach obedience to your own little ones.

As we saw in Paul’s commands to wives and husbands in vv. 18–19, these relationships are not one-way; they are reciprocal. Fathers have a very specific role to play towards their children as well, as they teach them the value of obedience.

An extreme illustration serves to incite further discussion: “Some years ago at a fair in Dallas, Texas, an interesting and yet tragic exhibition attracted many: a sallow-faced, emaciated boy was displaying a prize-winning hog. The boy seemed intent on seeing how many cigarettes he could smoke in the shortest period of time. The owner of the prize-winning hog was the father of the boy. He was a success at raising hogs, but a dismal failure at raising a son!”¹¹⁷

So let us turn our attention to fathers.

V. 21 | You will notice that Paul specifically addresses fathers. It is my conviction that *The Message*, while admirable in many

¹¹⁷ Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*, 430.

respects, goes too far in translating this term as “Parents.” Certainly, the application would be useful for both mothers and fathers, but Paul’s language is decidedly addressing fathers as a group, employing the common Greek term for father – πατήρ (*pater*).

Paul probably addresses fathers specifically because this command to be mindful of how we behave toward our children is especially needful for fathers.

We Dads are sometimes too willing to teach our kids the hard lessons through hard methods. While there is a place to teach our children about endurance and toughness, the methods and modes we use ought to reflect the heart of our heavenly Father without fabricating any undue hardship simply for the sake of suffering.

Moreover, Paul’s language indicates to fathers that employing too heavy of a hand will ultimately lead to discouragement in a lasting sense. Our children are born into a broken world; they will experience their fair share of hardship and discouragement along the way. That shouldn’t come from us as Dads. We are the ones who, like our heavenly Father, are to help them pick up the pieces when they fall and guide them on their way.

The term Paul uses in his command to the fathers, “do not provoke,” holds within its range of meaning: “exasperate,” “embitter,” and “aggravate” (NASB, NIV, NLT, respectively). Furthermore, this term can also mean “to cause someone to feel resentment.”¹¹⁸

We should not be so heavy with our kids that their spirits are crushed or they lose heart, devolving into just a shell of what our heavenly Father has designed them to be. If we hope to encourage our kids toward a life of committed discipleship and service in the kingdom, then we must understand that such a life demands boldness and, truth be told, a little wildness. God calls us to do all kinds of crazy things for Him. Let us endeavor to ensure that our kids learn how to obey and that we raise them well while retaining that spark that God has planted within them.

We should be exemplifying the heart of the Father in our relationships with our kids. How has the Father acted toward us? With grace, mercy, kindness, gentleness. Yes, correction when necessary, but ultimately restoration and healing. God, the Father, is consistently characterized as a good Father throughout the Bible.

¹¹⁸ “ἐρεθίζω,” Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 760.

Jesus, instructing the crowd during the Sermon on the Mount, teaches them about pursuing/seeking the Kingdom of Heaven when he says:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him (Matt 7:7–11)!

Our Father is a good father, and by following Him, we learn how to be children of God and good Fathers, too.

James writes: “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning” (James 1:16–17).

The Father’s nature is good, holy, and unchanging. He is not like us – fickle, ill-tempered, lazy, mean, resentful, manipulative, ugly. He is good, and we who are His kids have genuinely experienced His goodness towards us – even when

we are rebellious children seeking our own will and ignoring His voice.

Ultimately, we as fathers need to be encouragers of our children. We need to encourage them first and foremost to press into the Lord Jesus and fulfill their calling in Him. We need to communicate the gravity of their individual relationships with the Lord Jesus. We need to model the way for them as we pursue the Lord and demonstrate obedience to our heavenly Father. We need to be supremely careful not to break their spirits, remembering that the children we have been gifted with are God's kids first, and He cares how we treat His kids.

Mark records a terrifying warning for those who would cause a baby disciple to stumble: "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea" (Mark 9:42).

We understand that Mark's language isn't necessarily specifically about children, but it is certainly realistic to believe that young people, young disciples, children even, need to be handled with "kid gloves." That is to say that they deserve an exceptional amount of protection and care, and we as fathers should be ever mindful of that.

Finally, we must underscore the importance of these relationships and the importance of our own obedience to these scriptural imperatives.

Throughout the Bible, God uses family relationships to demonstrate grand truths about who He is: Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel; Abraham and Isaac; Isaac, Jacob, and Esau; David and his children. Jesus expressed His affection as He called people “son” or “daughter” (Matt 9:2, 22). Paul’s expressions of affection are evident as he calls Timothy and Titus true sons in the faith (1 Tim 1:2, Tit 1:4).

The Bible even uses figurative language to express these great truths. Consider for a moment Solomon, the author of Proverbs 1:

My son, hear the instruction of your father, And do not forsake the law of your mother; For they [will be] a graceful ornament on your head, And chains about your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, Do not consent (Pro 1:8–10).

Consider, for example, the Parable of the Lost Son and his older brother (Luke 15:11–32).

Most significantly, the Bible presents to us the relationship of **the Father** and **the Son**, a relationship best summed up in

the words of Christ: “I and [My] Father are one” (John 10:30).

Let this be our hearts. Let us endeavor to live this out, invite our children to this oneness with us, and show them the heart of the Father and the Son and the Spirit as we walk with them, and they walk with us.

CHAPTER 15 | COLOSSIANS 3:22–4:1

We progress in the text to find that Paul continues to instruct believers in the practicalities of living a life shaped by Jesus. The third relationship that he addresses is that of slaves and masters.

So far, he has addressed the marital relationship, the parent-child relationship (with a particular emphasis on fathers); and now he addresses slaves and masters, which, in the first century, would have naturally fit into the family unit of the day.

Before we proceed, we must lay a proper foundational understanding of the historic practice of slavery and how the Bible treats this topic.

Assistant Professor of NT Studies at Wheaton College, Dr. Esau McCaulley, writes about the Bible's treatment of slavery, noting, "On the first read, the Bible does not appear to say all that we want it to say in the way we want the Bible to say it. And yet this is the crucial part: the Bible says more than enough.... [T]he Christian narrative, our core theological

principles, and our ethical imperatives create a world in which slavery becomes unimaginable.”¹¹⁹

In our modern era, especially in America, we are prone to interpret such passages through our own history. The danger then is that our understanding of the text is viewed not as the author intended nearly 2000 years ago, but it is skewed to account for the much more recent tragic history of European colonialism and the systematic plunder of the African continent.

Sadly, slavery has existed since time immemorial. It is part and parcel of the broken creation that we live in. It is the result of human sin. The grotesque human ambition to violate and constrain the freedom of our fellow brothers and sisters, who are made in God’s image, has existed from the beginning.

Slavery is attested to as far back as the Genesis account (Gen 37:27), and it was experienced by the Hebrews, God’s people, under the Egyptians for over 400 years (Ex 1:14; 12:30)!

In fact, there are several instances in the Bible where God purposefully designates certain social protections within the Hebrew Law followed by the admonition, “Remember that

¹¹⁹ Esau McCaulley, *Reading While Black* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020), 139.

you were once slaves in the land of Egypt” (Deut 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22).

In times past, men have twisted the Scriptures to claim that the Bible is pro-slavery. Indeed, this was a tactic employed by plantation owners and ambitious colonizers who tried to use God’s Holy Word to subdue other people groups.

Please understand that the Bible **did not create** nor endorse slavery — human wretchedness is responsible for that.¹²⁰

Rather, the Bible is ever faithful to present to us a high-definition, high-fidelity view of the human condition just as it is – in all of our wretchedness.

So, when the Bible presents slavery, including the legal allowance for the fair and right treatment of slaves, it is not an endorsement and certainly not an encouragement of the practice. Instead, God is reaching into human wretchedness through His Word to offer hope to those in bondage.

We must also note that the practice of slavery has not perished from the earth. It is still alive and well today. The

¹²⁰ M. G. Easton, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary and Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 636.

website humanrightsfirst.org estimates that there are 20.9 million victims annually, resulting in \$150 billion in profits.¹²¹

And, as we will see from our text, through believing slaves, God is, perhaps surprisingly, offering an example of His own faithfulness and the very image of Christ through fidelity in the midst of enslavement.

Remember that Paul wrote to the Corinthians about slaves seeking freedom: “Were you called [while] a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use [it]. For he who is called in the Lord [while] a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise, he who is called [while] free is Christ’s slave” (1 Cor 7:21–22).

We see then that the Bible makes allowance for those who are enslaved to seek freedom for the purpose of furthering the gospel, but if they were unable to gain their liberty, they were to rest in the assurance that Jesus is their freedom.

In these times, God calls His people, as He always has, to represent Him faithfully regardless of the fallen circumstances we find ourselves in and to bear up under affliction for His name’s sake and the hope of a final freedom found in Him.

¹²¹ “The Business of Modern Day Slavery,” <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/business-modern-day-slavery>.

The following serves to inform us on the context of slavery in the NT church.

Slavery in the biblical world was complex and normally very different than the slavery of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western world.¹²²

[S]laves may have numbered nearly as many as free people. Slavery was not racially based. It [was] common to condemn criminals, debtors, and prisoners of war to slavery; but by the first century most slaves were born as such.... Some slaves—doctors, accountants, teachers, philosophers, managers, clerks, copyists—had greater skill and education than their masters had. Other slaves worked on construction projects and in households, workshops, and mines. A fair number of slaves bought their freedom.... Or they were set free by their masters, though in this case usually not till the slaves had outlived their useful service.... To pay their debts or gain economic security, some people sold themselves into slavery, perhaps for a contractually limited period of time. Masters ranged from kind to cruel and considered their slaves, including young boys and girls, legitimate objects

¹²² Gary T. Meadors, "Slave, Slavery," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed., Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 740.

of sexual exploitation. Often they castrated their male slaves.¹²³

By Roman times slavery was so extensive that in the early Christian period one out of every two people was a slave.¹²⁴

To be very plain about how we reconcile our conception of slavery with the very recent history of enslaved people in the West, one source puts it:

Despite the Bible's themes of redemption from slavery, people throughout history have often used the Old Testament's emphasis on nationhood and conquest to justify subjugating and appropriating land and people. For example, the European colonialism of the 17th–19th centuries claimed to be “opening a path for commerce and Christianity” (David Livingstone, quoted in Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa*, 1), but rather than treating the peoples they encountered as brothers and sisters in

¹²³ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 5th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 54–55.

¹²⁴ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Slave, Slavery,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1971.

Christ, colonizers enslaved them and treated them as objects of commerce.¹²⁵

This is, in fact, counter to the Christian message, as spoken by the mouth of Christ – “to set the captives free” (Luke 4:18). Now consider our text.

Vv. 22–24 | Paul addresses slaves in Colossae. The NKJV translates the Greek word δούλος (*doulos*) as “bondservant” or “bondservants.” The idea is still the same – someone who, under bondage, is obligated by convention, law, force, or a combination thereof, to serve another person, their master.

Several Bible translations (NASB, NIV, and NLT) translate the same Greek word as “slave” or “slaves,” which is a stronger translation and cuts to the heart of the word without “gilding the lily” or trying to escape the harsh terminology of bondage.

As a matter of fact, having already presented the context of first-century slaves, it is unfortunate to see that some people in our time try to soften the language and understanding of slavery in the ancient world in order to appease our own consciences.

¹²⁵ Dan Nässelqvist and Georgina Jardim, “Slavery,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

The reality is that slaves in the ancient world were completely owned by somebody else, and they were responsible to and accountable to their master. **And**, what's more, potentially one-third to one-half of the population in Roman cities lived in this condition.

It is reasonable to assume then that large portions of the churches were composed of slaves. And that is one of the beautiful things about the church. It is a place, a body, where slaves are treated with fairness, equality, and kinship.

Paul writes to this very church that “there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave [nor] free, but Christ [is] all and in all” (Col 3:11).

In the church, we all stand on equal footing. As a matter of fact, we are all called to serve one another regardless of socio-economic standing with gladness and humility (Gal 5:13).

In God's eyes, and ideally in the eyes of the saints (Jas 2:1–9), the believing slave is equally holy, elect, and beloved of God. **And** the believing slave is called by Christ to represent Him well, even in his bondage. That is why slaves are commanded to be obedient in their service with their whole hearts, not simply with outward actions. Their faith in Christ propels them to live nobly in their bondage.

Dr. Esau McCaulley argues in these NT passages where slaves are exhorted to obey their masters that “Paul sees the enslaved person as a moral agent and not simply a tool. He instructs them as those capable of making decisions. He also seems to suggest that there is something in the gospel that makes them look upon their masters differently.... Paul, despite claims to the contrary, sought to limit the damage done by slavery and rethought the whole institution in light of the cross and the resurrection.”¹²⁶

And this is true for all of us in our lives – we are to represent Christ well no matter what our circumstances are. These believing slaves would have come from different walks of life, with varying degrees of comfort, affluence, and education. They would have been compelled to serve masters with varying temperaments ranging from hostile and murderous to warm and loving. But the same instructions are given to all – serve as to the Lord, not to men.

This reminds us that we are all serving the Lord – we are bound to Him and His cause!

In 1 Cor 7, Paul encourages the church to regard themselves as Christ’s slaves. That is some strong language! Do we truly

¹²⁶ McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 161.

consider ourselves slaves to the Lord Jesus Christ, or do our American hearts rebel against the thought?

Paul himself internalized this message, for he viewed himself as a slave of Christ. In his introduction to the Roman church, he wrote: Paul, a bondservant [δουλος – *slave*] of Jesus Christ, called [to be] an Apostle, separated to the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1).

He writes similarly in Phil 1:1 and Titus 1:1 – each time identifying himself as a slave of God and Jesus Christ.

He further writes in 1 Cor 9:19, “For though I am free from all [men], I have made myself a servant [δουλος – *slave*] to all, that I might win the more.”

He also issues the same exhortation to the early saints employing the language of slavery to indicate that we are not our own and that we were bought at a price (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23)!

We belong to somebody else in an authentic, substantial way. We are the treasured possession of Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Master, the one who directs our every move.

And yet, while we are found to be slaves of Christ and servants of one another, we find no greater freedom than right where we are – members of His Body.

For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Cor 3:17).

And,

[Y]ou have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15 NLT)

We have come to Jesus, we have come to know truth, and by that, we have been made free (John 8:32). And this is what we have learned, that the most authentic form of freedom exists in our hearts, in our souls, and will be realized in eternity with Christ.

That is the hope of the enslaved: no matter how the dark, broken world we live in presses against humanity and seeks to do violence to human freedom, we are free in Christ forevermore.

And since we are free in Christ, we seek to glorify His name through our acts of service in this earthly realm – although the people we serve are often undeserving. That is the grace of God worked out by the saints! To serve others willingly, faithfully, as unto Christ, extending God’s favor to them despite the wretchedness we encounter – that is grace.

Paul also reminds these saints that their inheritance, their reward, is from the Lord, regardless of their current circumstances.

Ultimately, the Lord Jesus Christ is over all creation, and He is the one who has promised to care for His children into eternity and beyond.

V. 25 | Here, we see Paul’s warning against wrongdoing. This is an important exhortation. We might infer as much from the earlier text as we consider the fullness of what it means to serve as unto the Lord, not to men.

But Paul goes so far as to explicitly state that those who do wrong will also be repaid for it. **And** there is no partiality with the Lord –He will not turn a blind eye to injustice whether the person acting unfaithfully is rich or poor, slave or free. All will be held accountable for their actions.

4:1 | Finally, Paul instructs those within the church who possessed slaves to reflect the heart of Jesus as well.

Parallel to the instructions given to slaves in v. 23 (“whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord”), masters are to bear in mind that they are not completely autonomous in and of themselves. They also have a Master – the Lord Jesus!

Those who found themselves in positions of authority in their culture were commanded to represent Christ as well. We see this in how Paul commands them to behave toward their subordinates – to be givers, to give that which is just (upright), and to be fair. This is the heart of Jesus; He is the Just One.

Paul's instructions to masters reiterate his exhortation to the saints in Ephesus: "And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him" (Eph 6:9).

Gathering all of this together in a unified thread, we must consider how Jesus Himself related to the office of the slave and master.

Just thinking about slavery evokes strong emotions, as it should. Many would prefer to avoid these portions of Scripture altogether because they are hard.

We have wrestled with the American consciousness and national shame of slavery (albeit briefly) and see how our own national history can impact our understanding of Scripture.

We have considered the hard command for slaves past and present to represent Jesus in less-than-ideal circumstances – though the way be marked by much suffering.

We have seen the Apostle's command to masters to represent Jesus faithfully in fairness and goodness.

But does Jesus understand? Does He get it? Does the Bible, do the Apostles, have the authority and credibility to instruct humans in this realm that we find to be so painful?

The answer is a resounding yes. Paul describes Jesus' great stoop into this fallen creation in Philippians 2, wherein Jesus Himself elected to take the position of a slave for our sakes:

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross (Phil 2:5–8 NLT).

Jesus wasn't born into privilege. He suffered. He was tempted, humiliated, and scorned. He understands the human condition. He left glory and universal privilege for our sakes, debasing His glory along the way (and, paradoxically, building upon it!)

We have used Phil 2 for much spiritual encouragement in our age and to instruct the church in taking the place of a servant for the sake of others. That is right and good.

In a moving act of self-deprecation, the early church took Paul's instructions, and Christ's example, to the very limits of human obedience. "Clement of Rome says that many Christians sold themselves into slavery in order to feed the poor or ransom other slaves (1 Clement 55.2)."¹²⁷

Do our hearts revolt at the thought of our ancient forbears giving themselves into literal slavery for the sake of others!? Help us, Lord, to have this heart! This is remarkable! This is radical, but it is no more radical than what our Lord Jesus has done for us.

This is our Lord, the one who became a slave for our sakes, the one who binds us to Himself, and the one who has freed us forevermore.

¹²⁷ Nässelqvist and Jardim, "Slavery."

CHAPTER 16 | COLOSSIANS 4:2–6

We leave the special instructions for specific groups that Paul addresses in Col 3:18–4:1 (wives/husband; children/parents; slaves/masters) and now receive instruction for the whole church.

Vv. 2–4 is one long sentence and contains several elements, but the chief command that Paul issues to the members of the church at Colossae is to continue in prayer. That is the basic thought, and then Paul begins to elaborate on the characteristics that they should ensure are present in their corporate prayer life.

When we come across portions of Scripture like this, it is exceedingly important that we take a moment to pause and really absorb what is being said about prayer. Prayer is nearly universal – even adopted by unbelievers and pagans – and sometimes, our concept of prayer appears to be more shaped by those outside influences than by Scripture.

Paul told them to continue in prayer, inferring that the Colossians were a praying people already. The first mark of this enduring prayer is steadfastness or devotion. Several other versions render this verse: “Devote yourselves to

prayer” (NASB, NIV, NLT). This is a timeless exhortation for us as well.

Prayer is often one of the crucial areas in which Christians flounder. I take great hope in knowing that the Scriptures, while making allowance for our very human approach to prayer, continually exhort us to be a people of constant prayer, that we would spend time talking **with** God and not simply talking about Him.

In fact, prayer is one of the foundational tenets of the church, as revealed in Acts 2:42: “And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

Again, Jesus placed much emphasis on prayer and was Himself a man of constant prayer: “Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

And, of course, Paul famously wrote to the Thessalonians, “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17).

Perhaps that is why so many of us feel our prayer lives are so mediocre. We find ourselves offering up lifeless form prayers that resemble equations more than the outpouring of our hearts. We mutter the same recycled words over and over

again, attempting to pass them off as prayers, and then we feel like we have fallen short somehow.

Perhaps our felt guilt is exactly because we **are** aware of the importance of prayer, but sometimes it feels as if prayer has become one of the incidentals of our faith rather than part of the core bedrock.

May the Lord grant us perseverance to persist in our prayers, and may we be teachable as He shows us the importance of prayer.

And, as a practical exhortation, if there is ever any doubt on where to begin, may we have hearts like the disciples to come to Jesus and ask Him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1).

While we would not consider the text under consideration to be comprehensive in its treatment of prayer, Paul does his part to instruct the church on what prayer should look like and how often it should occur.

Notice that, inasmuch as Paul commands the church to remain devoted to prayer, he also encourages the church to watchfulness or vigilance in their prayers.

What are we to be watchful of? Paul doesn’t say. So then, the scope of watchfulness is wide open. This sense of watchfulness is not limited to an eschatological (last days)

context¹²⁸ as found in other portions of Scripture (Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36). It is a more general sense of seeing and discerning what is happening around us in the world, the church, our lives, and our hearts.

Richard Melick writes, “Informed prayer is likely to be more purposeful, personal, and powerful.”¹²⁹

Just as we have all experienced the lulls in our prayer lives, trapped in a rut of our own designs, we have also experienced deeply meaningful seasons of prayer where our spirits soar, and we feel more connected with the Lord than ever before.

In these moments, we find that we are an open book before the Lord, and we have laid our souls bare before Him, interceding for others, praising Him for His work, and confessing our sins, among other things. In those moments that we draw near to God, He is ever faithful to draw near to us (James 4:8).

Watchfulness and engagement with our world and our own spiritual conditions allow us to pray in a vigilant manner. And we are assured that God hears and knows the prayers of the saints corporately and individually (John 16:26–27). In those

¹²⁸ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 321.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 322.

moments, we cast our cares upon Him, knowing that He cares for us (1 Pet 5:7).

The next mark of Christian prayer is thanksgiving. Interestingly, the Greek word behind this is εὐχαριστία (*eucharistia*), a word many Christians have heard before, which means “the quality of being grateful” and “the expression or content of gratitude.”¹³⁰ Louw and Nida write, “Thanks is often expressed in highly idiomatic ways. For example, in some languages, one says thank you by saying ‘may God pay you.’... In other instances, thankfulness may be expressed as ‘you have made my heart warm.’”¹³¹

In this, we realize that even as we are being watchful, vigilant, and devoted in our prayers and are addressing the heavy things of life, cancers, deaths, overt sin, injustice, etc., we are still a people of thanksgiving because our worldview isn’t constrained to only the heavy subjects.

As believers in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, we remain unconquered by death and despair – sons and daughters of light.

Although we live in this world yet are watchful, it is easy to identify the darkness and despair. We are but pilgrims and our

¹³⁰ Arndt, *Lexicon*, 416.

¹³¹ Louw and Nida, *Semantic Domains*, 428.

worldview looks past this one into eternity. We are thankful in the midst of strife, being assured of the end of our faith and the goodness and justice of God.

So then, while we may be restricted by tunnel vision and spend too much time and energy on all of the darkness around us, we need to take time in our prayers to thank God for what He has done and what He has promised to do rather than simply offer up only our baggage without any recognition of His goodness towards us or what He has done for us.

If we leave our prayer times feeling more defeated and bummed out than when we began, then we are doing it wrong. Besides giving us time and space to speak with God, prayer reminds us that we are not alone in this. Jesus is near to us by His Spirit and His Word, and we have every reason to hope and to rejoice in the Lord in the face of every difficulty.

Additionally, our prayers are to be marked by a concern for others – not just in a general sense (although it is good to be concerned about people that way) – but by looking for God to move through His people. Paul’s specific prayer request was that He might have more opportunities to share the gospel – and that He did, no doubt in part, fueled by the

prayers of the saints. By praying like this, we also labor alongside those workers and share in their work.

Also, notice that even though at this time Paul is imprisoned (“in chains”), he looks to continue his work of revealing the “mystery of Christ.”

This “mystery of Christ” shouldn’t cause us any undue fear or awkwardness. It is not a mystery in the sense that nobody has heard it or can understand its meaning.

Earlier in this letter, Paul writes, “the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, *but now has been revealed to His saints*” (Col 1:26, emphasis mine).

We, the saints, are the keeper of the mystery of Christ.

N.T. Wright suggests, “It is the mystery which consists in Christ—not merely in him as an individual, but in the wide implications of who he is and what he has achieved.”¹³²

When we take a minute to consider the depth of this work, we can confidently say that it is a mystery indeed! But it is a mystery that God desires to reveal to men so that they may be saved.

¹³² Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 156.

Perhaps paradoxically, the mystery of Christ is also a certainty and one that Paul desired the Colossians would pray to be revealed¹³³ more and more to the world.

Let our prayers petition for the furtherance of the good message of Jesus Christ that it might become more and more visible to those we encounter. And, on an individual note, may we continue to mine the mystery of Christ in our own lives as we fall deeper into it.

V. 5 | Following his instructions on prayer, Paul directs the church on how they are to interact with the unbelievers outside of the church.

Nowhere does Paul intimate that Christians should look down upon unbelievers or treat them disrespectfully, spitefully, or in hostility. Instead, he tells them that they must be wise in their interactions with unbelievers.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians about how they were conducting themselves toward those outside and inside the church under very difficult circumstances marked by internal sin and strife.

¹³³ Consider Paul's use of the word φανερόω – 'to make appear, to make visible, to cause to be seen.' Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 278.

His instruction to the Corinthians bears on our lives as well. Christians can sometimes come off as scared of the world or of sinners (forgetting where we come from). If we are not wise in our interactions with unbelievers, we can come off as “holier than thou” or self-righteous.

Weirdly, in the Corinthian church, it appears that the saints there were readily accepting flagrant sexual misconduct within their church while looking down at those outside the church.

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet [I] certainly [did] not [mean] with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what [have] I [to do] with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person” (1 Cor 5:9–13).

In essence, Paul was telling the Corinthians to realign their moral compass. You can’t leave the world – which is full of

sinner – so you need not be concerned about passing judgment against them. **But** you who are in the church are called to be different, and you’re not to put up with those who falsely call themselves believers while living like unbelievers. To the most extreme extent, Paul commands the Corinthians to cast that person out of the church!

F.F. Bruce writes, “It remains true that the reputation of the gospel is bound up with the behavior of those who claim to have experienced its saving power. People who do not read the Bible for themselves or listen to the preaching of the word of God can see the lives of those who do, and can form their judgment accordingly.”¹³⁴

Unfortunately, many Christians have given great cause for others to besmirch the gospel and the church. But we should walk in wisdom toward unbelievers understanding that how we live matters. And we should give no cause for the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme His holy name (2 Sam 12:14).

Peter reinforces this idea when he writes, “Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world” (1 Pet 2:12).

¹³⁴ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 174.

Also note that Paul doesn't encourage the church to some form of monasticism or "holy huddle" or commune life separated from the world. We are to engage the world around us: "So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making His appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, 'Come back to God!'" (2 Cor 5:20 NLT)

And so, we are to buy up the time that we have in this world and around unbelievers, with the hope that Jesus will snatch them into His eternal kingdom. Because Jesus loves them dearly, and we do too!

Don't waste your time passing judgment on others! Redeem your time, walking in wisdom toward them!

V. 6 | Building upon this thought of how we are to interact with unbelievers, Paul instructs them on their speech – what they say. This is profound.

Not only is our conduct to be evidence of our heavenly citizenship, but the words that proceed from our mouths should make that evident as well.

That is to say, there should be no inconsistency in what we say and how we live. This is often where many Christians go off the rails – one way or the other.

Some will claim, “It’s not what I say that matters, but only how I live.”

Another will claim the opposite, using the liberty of Christ as a cloak for sin (1 Pet 2:16) while saying all the right things.

Words and deeds must go together! That is part of the work of the Spirit in our lives to bring us into unity with Christ and thereby unify our lives completely – in word and in deed. As Paul has already set forth: “And whatever you do *in word or deed*, [do] all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Col 3:17, emphasis mine).

How should our speech proceed then from our mouths? Always with grace! That is – undeserved favor applied to others. There is a way to “contend earnestly for the faith” (Jude 3), to rebuke, correct, instruct, etc. (2 Tim 3:16), and to oppose lies and heresies all while doing so with grace.

Grace doesn’t mean agreeing on all points with those who oppose the truth. When we find ourselves in those conversations, we can still demonstrate Christ’s love and patience, and we can still speak truth.

We are called to have speech marked by grace – and many of us find that we are learning a whole new language when we set out to adopt this manner of speaking.

Additionally, our language should be salty! Not in the pejorative sense, but in a way that what we say has value, is hearty, tasty, and good, even as it is true.¹³⁵

In so doing, we will make ourselves fully prepared to engage unbelievers when they have questions. We shouldn't shy away from those questions but, as those redeeming the limited amount of time that we have, we should fully avail ourselves of those opportunities so we can pass along some delicious morsel of truth from Jesus to them. That is certainly an act of grace.

This gives us cause for some self-reflection. Is our speech towards others characterized as bitter and cold like leftover oatmeal at the bottom of the pot? Or is our speech, by the grace of Christ, seasoned with salt, warm, and appetizing, like a delicious T-bone on the grill?

Let it be with much warmth and much flavor that we seek to speak forth that message that God has given us.

Let us not shrink from the task of answering the questions from those outside as we walk in wisdom toward them.

¹³⁵ “[S]easoned with salt’... is understood to mean that their conversation should be witty, interesting, pointed, not insipid or dull. And finally their conversation should always be adapted to the needs of everyone with whom they speak of the Christian message (for a similar idea see 1 Peter 3:15).” Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101.

Believe, loved one, that Christ has given you all that you need for that task, and count yourself blessed when you are in that moment because He has chosen you for it, and He will carry you through it for His glory.

CHAPTER 17 | COLOSSIANS 4:7–18

For the Bible student, the verses we come upon have an air of familiarity to them. They may even appear to us to be formulaic, sharing certain common characteristics with the endings of Paul's other letters. Since that is the case, we are sometimes tempted to skim over them in a cursory manner, in the same way that we are tempted to treat the introductions to Paul's letters.

The reasons why some spend only minimal time on these portions of Scripture are diverse. Perhaps we think that we have already received the essential parts of Paul's message to the Colossians – the rich Christology – so we have no need for these final, personal remarks.

Perhaps we see these portions of Paul's writings to be so similar in form and content with one another that we become somewhat numb to them. Unfortunately, we may adopt the attitude of, "I've read this before, so I don't need to read it again." But remember that these portions of Paul's letters are as equally inspired as the rest, and there is still much to learn from them.

And if we feel like Paul's introductions and conclusion come off as repetitive, consider for a moment that there is much repetition of theme and content throughout the grand narrative of Scripture, and perhaps that is exactly because the Lord God knows how best to present truth to us so that we will remember it! Over and over again!

If we minimize the theological importance of the introductions and closings of Paul's letters, we do ourselves a great disservice.

In vv. 7–18, we find that there is nothing corporate about Paul's letter, nothing that hints at a form letter – these verses have a very personal feel to them.

In these verses, Paul writes about people, very real people who make up the broader church. Some of these people would have been familiar to the Colossians already, but the point is that Paul here communicates to the church what is going on – who is where, who is going where else, and who is laboring for them. Paul is intentionally commending dearly loved workers he has labored with to a dearly loved church in order to strengthen their shared bonds and remind one another of their shared fellowship in Jesus. The basic thought may be something like: you're not alone in this.

Vv. 7–15 | Throughout these verses, Paul commends to the Colossians eight men who labored with him in ministry – Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus called Justus, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas.

These men with whom Paul labored had commendable qualities. They earned their good reputations through their shared labor and suffering with Paul. They were “in the trenches” together, as it were.

Notice the shared characteristics of these men – beloved brother, faithful, fellow minister/prisoner/worker, servant.

Do you hear the affection that Paul has for them? Do you see their diligence and commitment to the ministry as he describes them?

Also, note the number of Paul’s fellow workers. Paul was not a one-man operation – though sometimes we may view him that way.

This can be especially true when we study through the Pauline Epistles because we attribute them to Paul specifically, but he was very often assisted in his letter writing by other men.

The co-author of this particular letter is none other than the renowned NT figure – Timothy! (Col 1:1)

That's important to know because even though Timothy isn't named here in this final list of co-laborers, Timothy was physically present with Paul and helped author this letter.

Now, the whole point of spending so much time considering these fellow workers is to see with our own eyes the shared responsibility of ministry.

Today, many churches operate as a one-man show. In fact, they are sometimes designed that way in an effort to consolidate power, influence, etc.

But that's not Jesus' design for the church and ministry relationships. All of the power and influence belong only to Jesus in the first place!

Jesus' design for the church is to place certain people with specific giftings among the church in order to equip the whole body, every person, for ministry.

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the Apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ (Eph 4:11–12 NLT).

Paul penned those words to the Ephesians! He understood the importance of specific offices within the church, and he

communicated the intent of the Lord: to use those specific ministry roles in order to equip Jesus' people to do Jesus' work.

This portion of Scripture attests to Paul's understanding of equipping others for ministry and allowing others to grab hold of ministry with their own hands as they serve Jesus. It shows us how Paul embraced the very practical and timeless application – others are to be involved in this blessed work, too!

We are all in this together! And we all have a role to fulfill and a job to do for Jesus (1 Cor 12).

So, consider this fact: you are somebody's Tychicus, or Epaphras, or Luke, or Timothy. You have a role in Christ's kingdom and should endeavor to fulfill that role faithfully.

Faithfulness is one of the shared characteristics of these servants that Paul loved so much. It is mentioned only two times explicitly (vv. 7 and 9), but from the descriptions of these men, it is clear that faithfulness was a shared characteristic by all of them.

Faithfulness is one of the most valuable characteristics of all in ministry.

Paul reminded the Corinthians about the work of the Apostles: “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Cor 4:1–2).

On the other hand, there are very few things more disheartening in ministry than unfaithfulness, also called by its other names: unreliable or flaky.

A non-committal attitude regarding the faith (unfaithfulness, unreliability, flakiness) indicates that the ministry of Jesus Christ, fellowshiping with his people, and knowing His heart aren’t a priority.

We have all lived that life. We have all placed other things over and above the things that Jesus has called us to. We have all bailed on other people who were counting on us in ministry, leaving them to figure out how they’re going to make lemonade out of lemons at the last minute.

Sadly, we are often all too willing to justify our commitment to many, many things over and above what Jesus has called us to.

As a pastor, it breaks my heart to see that because I know what those flaky people are missing out on – true, vivid, breathtaking life lived alongside the Lord Jesus in fellowship

with His body the church. It also breaks my heart because when we bail on those who are faithfully serving the Lord, those faithful servants get hurt too. They internalize much of that hurt and wonder if it's their fault that so and so is undependable.

Faithfulness is a rare trait indeed, and when we encounter it among God's people, it is like a breath of fresh air, filling us up and propelling us onward.

Where does this faithfulness come from? Christ alone. He is the faithful one, and He calls us to be like Him.

Notice too that these men had special roles to play as they supported the ministry.

Vv. 7–8 | Tychicus is described as beloved, faithful, and a servant. He was assigned the ministry of passing along news on Paul's present condition. That was certainly something that the church would have been interested in. He was also tasked with discovering what was going on at Colossae.¹³⁶

Tychicus was also given a ministry of comforting the church. To offer comfort to others is true pastoral work. Paul did not

¹³⁶ "If number of mentions is significant, this would make Tychicus, along with Silvanus, one of Paul's closest associates after Timothy and Titus." Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 271–272.

send him as some type of holy hammer but to comfort them in their distress – whatever it may have been.

V. 9 | Onesimus is similarly characterized as faithful and beloved **and** is a local, a native, one of the Colossians himself.

Onesimus is an interesting character study indeed! He was a runaway slave and the subject of the book of Philemon. While Philemon is separated from Colossians by the books of First and Second Thessalonians, First and Second Timothy, and Titus, many commentators include Colossians and Philemon together in their commentaries because of the proximity of date between the two letters.

Also note that Onesimus' status as a slave did not prohibit him from ministry. This created a truly beautiful dynamic within the church where slaves were on equal footing with everybody else (see commentary on Colossians 3:22–4:1 for more detailed information).

V. 10 | Aristarchus was another of Paul's companions who shared literally the same hardships as Paul, finding himself imprisoned for the faith (Acts 19:29; 27:2).

Mark is referred to as well; this is the same Mark who is believed to have authored the gospel bearing his name (some

believe Mark to be the oldest of the gospels, supposing that Matthew and Luke borrowed from his text).

Barnabas is mentioned by way of describing Mark (Paul and Barnabas parted ways earlier from one another because of a contention over Mark described in Acts 15:37–40).

V. 11 | We are introduced to a man named “Jesus called Justus.” Remember that the name Jesus was a common name for this age.

We also find here that Paul identifies these men (Aristarchus, Mark, and Justus) as believing Jews (“of the circumcision”).

Paul benefited from the comfort that they offered him. This was probably not the sole purpose of their ministry but was most likely born out of their shared lineage and culture.

Vv. 12–13 | We learn more of a man named Epaphras, who Paul referenced in the introduction of Colossians (Col 1:7).

It is believed that Epaphras was responsible (at least partially) for establishing the church in Colossae. Not much is known about him aside from Paul’s descriptions of him as a Colossian, a slave of Christ (a figure of speech indicating total devotion to Jesus), a messenger of the gospel, a man committed to prayer, and one who cared deeply about the Colossians and those in the surrounding region.

V. 14 | Paul commends Luke, the author of the gospel of Luke and Acts, who we learn here is a doctor.

And finally, and perhaps forebodingly, we come upon a man named Demas.

Much has already been said about the value and rarity of faithfulness in ministry.

But be warned, present faithfulness is no guarantee of future faithfulness. As we look at this list of faithful men in this particular season, we are also aware that not all of these men remained faithful.

Listen, ministry is hard sometimes. Discipleship comes at a high cost (Luke 14:25–33), but it comes with great reward, too (Luke 18:28–30).

It's all roses and unicorns when the ministry is blossoming, people are coming to know Jesus, and they're falling in love with God's Word.

Ministry is a grand thing to be a part of when circumstances are ideal, attendance and giving are up, all of the bills are all paid on time, people are digging into the Scriptures, and we are rejoicing along with those who are rejoicing!

But what about when the hard times come, as they inevitably do? What about the storms of life that require late nights and early mornings? What about when it's time to weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15)? What about when people become critical of your service to the Lord or become divisive gossips? What about when people stop coming for one reason or another? That's when you find out who people really are and what they're really pursuing.

During my time in the Army, I learned several huge life lessons. One of them is simple enough: you find out who somebody really is when they're hungry and tired. I don't mean to suggest that we can determine people's true hearts if they don't get to take a nap or if they skip lunch. I am referring to a more extreme degree. When a person has gone on four hours of sleep or less in a 48-hour period and hasn't eaten anything substantial in the same amount of time – that's when people reveal who they are, especially when the time comes for some relief, when it's time for food and sleep. Who's going to be first in line? Who is going to defer to others? Who is going to prolong their own suffering so that others may be served? All of these things are revealed in our moment of trial.

The same is true for life and ministry.

In our text, these men were with Paul even as he bore the shame of imprisonment, persecution, and to be sure, a fair amount of harassment. The faithful brothers, fellow workers, stayed until the end.

But as was the case with Demas, some stayed only while it was convenient and jumped ship in Paul's moment of need (2 Tim 4:10). What a shame.

It is our Lord's will that we would persevere for His cause! Let us be found faithful toward Jesus and one another (Heb 3:6; Rev 3:10–11).

V. 15 | See here how the churches had friendly communications with one another and were often composed of house churches.¹³⁷ How far have we gone where we look down on house churches and see other churches near to us as a threat rather than family? We are not competing with other churches; we are co-laboring with them!

Of particular textual interest here is ascribing the masculine gender to Nymphas in the KJV and the NKJV, which rely heavily on later manuscripts.

¹³⁷ “[T]here were close links between the churches in Laodicea and Colossae (ten miles apart).” Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 283.

Nymphas could be either a masculine or a feminine name. It is now commonly believed by most modern scholars that the language indicates a woman based on the earliest and most reliable source material.¹³⁸

V. 16 | We gain here a basic understanding of how Paul's letters first began to be received as formative documents communicating inspired doctrine to the church on the same level as OT Scripture (2 Pet 3:15–16).

Paul desired that the Colossians would share this letter with the Laodiceans and vice versa.

That letter to the Laodiceans has been lost to time. But the point stands that the first churches established a precedent of sharing these letters, with the understanding that the doctrine found in them wasn't only for them but held a broader application and principle to be received by the church as a whole throughout the ages.

This remains true for the church of our age. We continue to learn much from these letters, and it is important that we read

¹³⁸ “The gender of this person is not entirely clear, the confusion arising from two sources: (1) the Greek form, depending on how it is accented, could be the name of either a man, “Nymphas,” or a woman, “Nympha”; (2) the manuscripts differ in the possessive pronoun modifying “church,” some having *autou* (“his”), others *autēs* (“her”), and still others *autōn* (“their”).” Moo, *Colossians and Philemon*, 349.

and re-read them as we continue to be shaped into the blessed church that Jesus purchased with His own blood.

V. 17 | Paul addresses another man, albeit indirectly, named Archippus, and he uses the congregation at Colossae as his mouthpiece to speak to Archippus.

Even though Paul gives clear instructions for the congregation to speak to Archippus, this is not necessarily a slam-dunk for those who hold to a strict congregational church governance model. In fact, one is hard-pressed to find definitive examples of positive congregationalism in the Scriptures as a whole. **And** notice what the message from the congregation is: “Pay attention to the ministry that the Lord gave you, and fulfill it” (my paraphrase).

Paul didn’t tell the congregation to lord over Archippus or take a vote on his suitability or beat up on him, criticize his sermons, and pick doctrinal fights with him; they were commanded to encourage Archippus to do what the Lord told him to do!

While we don’t know the details of Archippus’ situation, this is a timely encouragement for anybody in ministry, especially when doubt creeps in and all one wants to do is quit.

Don’t quit, loved one! And if you ever want to share your opinion with your pastor, keep this verse in mind as a verse to

share with him: “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it.” That is like medicine for those in ministry! Hang in there!

V. 18 | Paul signs this letter with his own hand, affirming the apostolicity of the document – one of the key marks of NT Scripture. He also petitions the Colossians for their prayers as he faces hardship in prison and commends the grace of God to them.

There is no better way to close a conversation than a reminder of grace, the unearned favor of God towards sinners.

All of the profound doctrine that Paul has presented to the Colossians in this letter regarding the centrality of Jesus Christ is sandwiched between grace.

At the very beginning of this letter Paul writes: “To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ [who are] in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Col 1:2). Now he finishes: “Grace be with you. Amen.”

Let us bear this in mind as we follow Jesus, as we unravel the doctrines that He has given to us, and as we learn how to be the church. Let us remember that grace is the thing that holds all of this together.

It is God's grace at the first that saves us. It is His grace along the way that keeps us. And it will be His grace at the end that sees us home.

You are loved, dear one, favored by God. His grace abounds to you! So then, let us be gracious, too.

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