

Expository Studies in Colossians

by Ray C. Stedman

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WHERE HOPE BEGINS

truth. Thus the letter to the Colossians is very important in the New Testament record.

In the opening verses the apostle emphasizes the word hope, in marked contrast to the hopeless world of his day. How hopeless many people are growing today! Yesterday I received a phone call from a friend in another state seeking comfort and advice on how to handle the suicide of a very dear woman. This woman had been for years an outstanding Christian, but her husband was an alcoholic who had caused great grief to the family. He had stopped drinking for a year but, much to his wife's chagrin, had started drinking it again. Last week when he returned home from a late evening of drinking he found a note from her but two words---"No more." Going out into the garage he found her dead in the family car.

How do we explain that kind of hopeless despair, especially even among Christians? Today, teenagers are rising to unprecedented heights. Alcoholism, drug abuse, a hurtful lifestyle, homosexuality, financial problems, broken marriages, false friends and failed health are some of the causes for people losing hope. So many people today may be struggling to keep a sense of hope. The glory, the zing, has gone out of life. That is the situation the Colossians felt when Epaphras first began to speak the truth of the gospel to them.

Alexander Pope was the author of the oft-quoted proverb, "Hope springs eternal in the human breast," which is really not true. At times we all lose hope, and it is not always because of loss or failure. Right here in the Valley there are thousands of affluent people, living in luxurious homes, driving expensive cars, but if you talk to them you will discover that they are dead inside, empty, hollow, without hope.

Just a few weeks ago I learned something about one of our former elders which I had not known until a few weeks ago, before they ever became Christians, this man and his wife invited my wife and me to dinner. We spent the whole evening talking about Christ and the gospel. We had a delightful time but had no idea of the desperate situation of their situation. After we left that night the man opened his heart to Christ, but the story I heard was that for that same night he had planned his own suicide. Had he not heard the gospel that night he would have taken his own life. He went on to become a glowing, joyful Christian and served as an elder with us for quite a number of years.

The Colossians too were once hopeless but they had found hope. And with it they found two other enormously valuable commodities, called faith and love. Listen to these opening words of the letter:

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae."

These days it is necessary to point out that when the Scriptures talk about "brothers" and "brethren" it includes sisters as well---"sisters," we might say. If we understood the biblical truth about mankind we would not have gotten into the awkward situation we find ourselves in today, where we wonder whether we should call a woman a "chairperson" or "chairwoman," or what. That entire situation would be happily taken care of if we observed what the Bible says. "In the beginning," it says, " God created man, male and female in his own image, and he named them man." Thus, women have as much right to the word "man" as males do. Men can properly call themselves the "sons of God" just as men do, and they can properly include themselves in the term "brethren" as much as men do. Both are "men" in that generic sense. If we understood that there would be no need, as some are threatening today, to republish the New Testament, eliminating all so-called gender terms.

Paul continues,

"To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints---the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and which you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you."

Did you pick out the three words that are crucial there: faith, hope, and love? We could say these are the words of the apostle. He uses this triad in several of his letters. In 1 Thessalonians he writes about

of faith," "your labor of love," and "your patience of hope." Many of you have already remembered wonderful triad at the end of 1 Corinthians 13, "And now abide faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love."

Yes, love is what is needed in our world. But according to this Colossian statement love comes from hope. And where does faith come from? The NIV puts it this way: "the faith and love that spring from the truth that is stored up for you in heaven and which you have already heard about in the word of truth." It is extremely important to recognize that these wonderfully warm words, faith, love and hope, are related. Notice that they are four-letter words (love, hope), so not all four-letter words are bad. These words mark well call qualities of authentic Christians. If you are really a Christian, if you are one of the "holy and faithful brothers," the mark will be: you have faith and love which spring from hope, and that hope is four-letter word of the gospel.

Paul calls the Colossians "holy brothers." Many think of the word holy as a synonym for grim. Holy people, they feel, are sanctimonious, long-faced killjoys. Remember what one little girl said on seeing a murderer for the first time: "I don't know what you are but you must be a Christian; you look just like grandpa!" But holy really means "separated unto God"---or in modern terminology, "claimed by God." Christians are called holy because they belong to God. This morning we sang "Bless His holy name." Why is God's name holy? Because it is his name. We call his book the "holy" Bible because it is God's book. We call Palestine "Holy Land" because it peculiarly belongs to God, more than any other spot on earth. In that sense, "holy" has nothing to do with how you act but more with who you are. You belong to God. By faith the Colossians had believed what God said, therefore God claimed them for his own; they belonged to God.

Paul also calls them "faithful brethren." Here is the first hint of the struggles going on in the church.

Ephesians, "the heavenlies"), is a reference not to heaven after death, but to the invisible spiritual surrounds us on all sides right now. Thus, what this is saying here is that the gospel reveals the truth to us immediately coming from that invisible spiritual kingdom which surrounds us right at this very moment.

What is that hope? It is patent all through the New Testament. Jesus himself said, "Let not your hearts be troubled for I am with you." That is the hope that is awakened by the gospel. It is the good news that now, whatever you are facing, in your moment of weakness, peril, or hopelessness, Jesus is available. His strength can be imparted to you, his wisdom granted to you to steady you, strengthen you and help you to stand. That is the hope of the gospel. That is what awakens faith.

Faith means to act upon that hope. Faith means you believe that Jesus is there. At once you feel steadied and strengthened and you are able to go on and take whatever is coming. We have all known what it means to have some dear friend come along in a time of trouble to stand by and steady and encourage you. That friend is the Lord of Glory himself, what tremendous hope there is in that fact. That is what the gospel offers here: the hope that is in the gospel. Hebrews 11 says of Moses that "he endured because he saw the invisible." That is what Paul writes to the Colossians about: an invisible reality that is available right now. Jesus. He is there, ready to help and encourage.

Paul also calls this gospel "the word of truth." That is what marks its realism. Dorothy Sayers, the Christian philosopher, said, "The test of any religion is not whether it pleases us or is comfortable to us, whether it is true." Does it accord with reality? Does it do what it says it will do? That is the test.

The great thing about the gospel is that it is true. It really works. It does deliver people. When you feel defeated, cast down, or betrayed, Jesus stands there, available to you. That is the word of truth that offers to go with you to face the drug pusher. He offers his love and his acceptance when loneliness and horniness tempt you to wrongful sexual activity. He offers to steady you in times of pressure and anxiety. He offers forgiveness and restoration if there is any failure.

Northern Ireland. He had been a wild and rough man, raised in a Catholic area, and who would have had to do with Protestants. He joined the IRA and became, in fact, what was called "an enforcer." He was responsible to see that orders for terrorist acts---murders, bombings, or whatever---were carried out. He had to break the legs of the person who refused to carry them out. He had been in prison several times. During one of those prison experiences somebody gave him a New Testament. Reading it, he heard the time of the grace of God and the availability of Jesus Christ to forgive his sins.

He received the Lord, and was wonderfully changed. We heard him that night, interviewed by a Protestant pastor whose cousin had been killed some months before by the IRA. The men ended the interview by embracing one another before one thousand people in riot-torn, strife-filled Northern Ireland. What the gospel makes!

That kind of thing had been happening also in Colossae. It was happening all over the world, where the apostle went, and it still happens today.

The proof of the Colossians' faith was love, the apostle declares in verses 7 and 8:

"You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit."

Just as though I were there, Paul seems to say, Epaphras has been teaching you the truth. Epaphras was a man who started it all. We do not know much about him, although he is mentioned in a couple of letters of Paul. He evidently was a layman, and had probably been part of the group that Paul himself led when he was resident in Ephesus for three years.

There, as Acts records, Paul rented a hall (the school of Tyrannus), and for five hours a day, six days a week for three solid years he taught the Scriptures. I would have given almost anything to have attended that curriculum, taught by Paul. Many who were present went out through all the provinces spreading the word, and among them was Epaphras. He came into the insignificant city of Colossae and probably started a Bible class. He had friends also in Laodicea and started another class there and another one over in Hierapolis.

Epaphras simply told the people who came the truth about Jesus: the meaning of his death, the glory of his resurrection, his accessibility to them by means of the Spirit who came on the day of Pentecost. He excited them and awakened them in their hopeless condition. They found hope again, and faith and love along with it. A healed community of beautiful people came into being and caught the attention of the rulers of those pagan cities. That is God's favorite way of evangelism.

As you hear the Scriptures expounded here on Sunday, perhaps some of you may be thinking that you don't know the Bible like one of the pastors, then you could be of use to God. But don't you see that you are the important people, the true evangelists? You are out there, rubbing shoulders with people who are in need of hope, hearing their sad stories, meeting them in the streets and in the stores, having coffee with them, and giving them the word of hope. That is how the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire, in Asia, and hundreds of churches came into being. The gospel has power to change, power to awaken, power to give hope, and out of hope springs faith and love. What a remarkable thing it is!

This area is our corner of the world. We too can see these very things happening here. What excitement and joy come into your life when you reach out with the good news, the only source of hope in the world, to the hopeless ones around.

Prayer

Our Father, thank you that you are the God of hope. You have sent a word of truth into this broken, despairing world. What a remarkable thing it is, in a world where everything comes to us biased and slanted by those with axes to grind, to find a place where there is a word of hope.

I'm going to stop there briefly although it is difficult to stop anywhere in this wonderful paragraph all one thought.

Paul knows that the Colossian Christians are living in a dangerous world. As we go on in this letter discover what is threatening them. A seething volcano of false teaching has begun to erupt and is threatening to destroy the simplicity of the faith that is producing such beauty and liberty in their lives. In Rome, a prisoner in chains, and unable to travel to Colossae, a thousand miles east, to help them, he can do nothing he can do physically for them. But spiritually, he is a powerful prayer warrior who can create amidst a tremendous opportunity to know truth that will free them and enable them to withstand the false teaching. That, then, is what he is doing: he is praying for them.

The striking thing about this prayer is the very first sentence of it: "For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you..." This was a continuing prayer. As far as we know, Paul had never been to Colossae. Apart from one or two among them, he did not personally know them. And yet he prays continually for them. When we come to statements like this in Scripture it is quite natural. When did he do this? Day and night he is chained to a Roman guard, he never has a moment to himself, or asleep, he is bound to his jailer. Furthermore, when he is awake, his friends are dropping by to seek his counsel and instruction. He even ministers to the Roman guards, many of whom came to him, as we learn in the letter to the Philippians. He is busy writing letters, too, so when did he find time to pray for the Colossians?

The answer lies in the form of prayer that Dr. Carl Lundquist calls "living prayer." Here is a quotation from a recent letter I received.

This is the description of an ongoing life of prayer, used by Maxie Dunnam in his Workbook on Living Prayer. It refers to quiet, whispered prayers and praises that flow from our hearts all day long. Dunnam suggests that we use interruptions, people or events that break in unexpectedly upon our day, as calls to specific prayer. Most of us use mealtime---grace time---to think of God and to voice our thanks to him. But more than food can call us to prayer. Frank Laubach, the modern mystic, challenges us to use the newspaper or the television set in the same way. As world decision-makers are pictured before our eyes we can breathe a quiet prayer for them by name. We can read a newspaper prayerfully, whispering back to God our intercessions for those in need, about whom we are reading. When someone calls our attention to himself, even in an impolite way--- tripping us on the bus, jabbing us with an umbrella, dodging in front of us (in traffic)---Laubach suggests that of the four billion persons in the world, God may be calling that particular individual to our attention in order to inspire prayer for him.

Have you ever prayed for people who cut in front of you in traffic, asking God to bless them, not to harm them? That is what this is suggesting: that continual prayer arises constantly as a reaction to what you see and hear through. I am sure this explains the apostle's words here. Through the day he would think of the Colossians, how they were doing and what was threatening them, and he would breathe a prayer for them. That means when he says, "we have not stopped praying for you." We can pray for each other in that wonderful way.

The illuminating aspect of this is what Paul prayed for. Notice what he says: "...asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." That is the content of his prayer. Everything else in the passage flows out of that. The one thing he asks for is that the Colossians understand God's will. It is clear that this is the important thing to Paul. He knows that if they believe and understand the will of God, everything good that he desires for them will follow. Thus, the chief aim of a believer's life ought to be to know God's will.

Here is where many young Christians go astray. They think the will of God is an itinerary they must follow, where God wants them to go, and what God wants them to do. Most of their prayers are addressed to these thoughts in mind. What should I do today? Where should I go? Whom should I marry? etc. There is a simple and profound psychological principle involved in this. God knows us, and he knows that our behavior

out of who we think we are. Have you ever asked someone who upset you, "Who do you think you are anyway?" We instinctively know that offensive behavior is a result of who we think we are. That is why the challenges are given.

God, too, knows that. The glory of the good news is that he has made us into something different than we once were. Therefore the primary course in the curriculum of the Spirit is to learn who you are now, who God has made you to be, and, especially, your new relationship to him. This is beautifully captured in the words we consider so important we have written it right across the front of our auditorium, "You are not your own...you are bought with a price." You no longer belong to yourself, so you are no longer to live for yourself. Your will, your pleasure, your comfort are no longer to be primary in your life, but what God calls for and what he has made you to be. The more you understand who you now are, and what God has made you to be, the more your behavior will automatically change and you will do the things that follow from that passage. That is why Paul puts the knowledge of God's will first.

Where do we find that out? Paul goes on to say: "...asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." There are two things that enable us to discover the will of God. The first is "spiritual wisdom," i.e. wisdom that comes from the Spirit, not from the natural mind of man. In 1 Corinthians the apostle contrasts these two, saying, "our ministry is not according to the wisdom of man, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power." He goes on to say, "We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages, for our glorification." Paul is speaking of divine wisdom that is not of human life---how to understand ourselves and how the world functions---which God reveals, which natural man knows nothing, no matter how well educated he may be.

I will never forget listening to a prominent psychiatrist a number of years ago telling me about his life. He had become a Christian, of his honors and his wealth and how sought---after his advice was by industry all over the country. But his inner life began to break down and he felt more and more hollow and empty. In the last, when he took his six-year-old son, dead, out of a swimming pool, he began to read the Bible. There came a moment when he sat with his head in his hands saying, "My God, what an ass I've been. All the wisdom had led him to nothing worthwhile. Then he began to learn what God says about life.

That is what Christians need to discover: what God thinks about life. That is reality. If you want to live realistically, then read and study your Bible to discover how God looks at things. Everything else is fantasy. It is like the perfume advertisements on television; outrageous, out-of-this world fantasies. But that is the way God thinks. If you want to live realistically, learn spiritual wisdom, the wisdom of God.

The second thing necessary to discover the will of God is "understanding." That is the application of the wisdom you are learning to the specific circumstance you are going through. As someone has well said, "I have a clear vision of what needs to be done." Some of you are struggling with problems and you don't know what to do. The first thing you need is to understand how God sees your problem and what he says about it. Then there will come, as you pray and seek his face, a clear vision of what needs to be done and the steps to take or not to take. That is how to discover the will of God.

This all comes from the Spirit. These are not natural abilities. They are given by the Spirit, and therefore possible to all believers. So when you open the Bible, pray that God will help you to understand what he says. I often pray Henry Van Dyke's beautiful prayer,

Grant me the knowledge that I need
To solve the questions of the mind.
Light Thou my candle while I read,
To keep my heart from going blind.
Enlarge my vision to behold
The wonders You have wrought of old.

That is asking for what Paul speaks of here: spiritual wisdom and understanding.

The apostle goes on to say why he wants them to understand God's will. It is what he knows will

Colossians gain the knowledge of his will. Here is what he says will happen: "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and with joy give thanks to the Father." There are five things here, the first three of which are activities that believers have a choice in---we can deliberately choose to do them---and the last two are results that will grow out of these three.

First, that you may "live a life worthy of the Lord." When you understand what God has made you, though you don't deserve it at all---his child, cherished by him, your guilt and sin taken care of, and his Father is your loving Father who protects you, guides and guards you, and when you see him in all his majesty and beauty then you will become concerned about whether your behavior reflects his beauty, and what he will think of your God when they are watching you. That is "a life worthy of the Lord." In others of his letters the apostle urges Christians to "walk worthy of their calling." This is the first thing we are to be concerned about: our impact upon others, how our lives are impacting theirs, and what our actions make them think of God.

The second activity that will flow from a knowledge of who we are is to seek "to please him in every way." The chief aim of every believer ought to be that he is pleasing to God; that he seeks to live in a way that delights God. What quality of life is pleasing to God? The Scripture probably puts it most effectively in a negative way. In the book of Hebrews we are told, "Without faith it is impossible to please God!" It is faith that pleases him. Every time Jesus approved or commended people it was because of their faith. "You have great faith," he said to the woman who pled with him to heal her flow of blood. "Your faith is great," he said to a centurion who asked him to heal his servant. Whenever our Lord commends people for anything it is because they believe him and act on what he says. They don't conform to the customs of people, but rather, they swim against the stream of life and stand firmly upon what he says, trusting him. That is how we please God.

Here is the third result: "bearing fruit in every good work." The "fruit," always and everywhere in Scripture is the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, and peace, in our relationships and actions with regard to others; compassion, encouragement, and help in a time of stress, bringing a word of peace into a troubled atmosphere. "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." That is what Paul is talking about: "bearing fruit in every good work."

After these begin to take place in our lives, two results will follow. The first is given at the end of verse 10: "growing in the knowledge of God." Paul has been praying that the Colossians come to know God better. Now he says that as they put these things into practice they will know God better than ever before. To walk worthy of God, and to please him with fruitful activity results in knowing God more and more intimately.

Now I want to call attention to what I am going to say next so that you will not miss it: knowing God is the most exciting thing that can ever happen to you! Knowing God is the secret of excitement and vitality. People who know God are never bored for the opposite of knowing God is boredom. If you are bored, you are not a Christian, it is because you do not adequately know your God. In his presence it is impossible to think of anything else. He is an exciting, captivating Being, filled with fresh ideas, concepts and possibilities that you never could have dreamed.

To know God means that you are always turned on about everything because you see God everywhere: in nature, in people you meet, in trials, hardships and challenges, everywhere. That is why people who know God are always exciting to be with. They lift your spirits when you meet them. Faces light up as they enter a room: They know God, and the excitement of that captivates and changes them. That is what Paul is talking about. It happens as we "grow in the knowledge of God" and put into practice these three goals in our lives. That is what Jesus means when he says to the woman at the well, "I will put in you a well of water, springing up to eternal life." It is always there: that refreshing quality of knowing God.

The second result is found in verses 11 and 12: "being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, with joy, giving thanks to the Father."

there is a new cycle of emphasis in the Christian world upon signs and wonders as the mark of spiritual power. I have lived through several of these cycles, so I know what will happen. All the initial enthusiasm ebb and fade, and life will inevitably return to the spiritual doldrums. That is because these signs and wonders are never the emphasis of Scripture. The sign of true spiritual power is right here: people who learn to become patient and longsuffering, with joy! It is these who have touched the wellsprings of true spiritual power. It is as plain as the nose on your face. Paul says: "being strengthened with all power according to the glorious might."

When you are faced with irritating circumstances, or difficult people, it takes power to remain patient and longsuffering. Our natural tendency is to get upset, to scream in impatience, or to become resentful. It takes power to resist these when you feel them rising within you. Every believer has that power. The sign is that they lead quiet, cheerful lives, that hang in to the end. That is what is meant by endurance. The first word is best translated "stick-to-it-iveness." People who have this quality don't quit. They hang in to their relationships, despite the pressures of their work or their circumstances. Endurance is a word primarily to circumstances. The second word, translated here "patience," is really "longsuffering," a willingness to wait and not pay back in kind. It has to do with willingness to forgive and refusing to seek revenge.

The third mark is that of joyful gratitude, a cheerful spirit that never gets discouraged. Years ago I met a Christian businessman who had a cleaning woman named Sophie. He said to her one day, "Sophie, you're always so cheerful? You don't have much in life but you're always cheerful. What's your secret?" She replied, "Well, it's the way I read my Bible." He said, "I read the Bible too but I don't find myself being cheerful like you are." She said, "You don't read it right. My Bible says, 'Glory in tribulation.' G-I-O- doesn't spell 'growl.' That is what you do. You growl in tribulation. If you gloried in it, then you'd be yourself looking at it as a challenge, as an opportunity for your Lord to display what he can do, and you'd be cheerful about it." There is a great lesson in that story. It is what will reveal that we are growing in our knowledge of God.

The closing paragraph states clearly the three things that we can always be grateful for. We may feel like complaining about a few things, but we can always come back to these three things for truth that is continually true of every believer. The more we think about them, the more we are grateful.

us. That is forever rendered untrue by the work of Jesus. He has brought us into his kingdom and we share the love of the Father.

Near, so very near to God,
Nearer I could not be.
The love with which He loves His Son,
Such is His love for me.

We are wanted, cherished children of a loving Father.

We have been delivered also from the feeling of being unworthy. We have "redemption, even the forgiveness of sins." I often think of that wonderful verse in the old hymn, Beneath the Cross of Jesus:

Upon that cross of Jesus
Mine eye at times can see,
The very dying form of One
Who suffered there for me.
And from my smitten heart with tears,
Two wonders I confess:
The wonder of redeeming love,
And my unworthiness.

By natural birth we are all unworthy, but love has set us free, and made us both wanted and worthy. The forgiveness of sins means we can start every day with a fresh, clean slate. All of yesterday's mistakes have been washed away, not in order that we might go back and repeat them, but that we might have a new start as we begin again. Every day we start in afresh until we learn to do it right. God is with us. He does not let us fall into the same sins of the past continually. The forgiveness of sins is something we ought to rejoice in every day, because the burden of sin and guilt of yesterday is no longer dragging us down. We are free to walk into liberty and peace. We should be for these incredible blessings!

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Colossians 1:9-14
Second Message
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MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE

by Ray C. Stedman

Charles Wesley's wonderful phrase from "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing,"

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the Incarnate Deity

captures the central truth of our Christian faith. Since the appearance of Jesus on this earth two thousand years ago, Christians have believed that the man called Jesus of Nazareth is and was God the Creator; that the Son dwelt in a human body, thus "veiled in flesh the Godhead see." Every other doctrine of Christianity is based out of that great truth. If it be denied, one has denied the heart of Christian faith and has embraced a false religion.

Recently I attended a conference of two hundred and fifty theologians, pastors and Christian leaders in Chicago. We met to restate in contemporary terms, and apply to the problems of today, the great

Christian faith. The first paper delivered was on "The Living God." It was a marvelous statement of the central truth of all: that Jesus Christ is God. The paper developed the concept of the Trinity: that God exists as a single individual, but there are three persons who act together as one in the Godhead. Theologians have pointed out that nowhere in Scripture can be found a flat-out statement that God exists in three persons and thus many claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is not really taught in the Bible. But what we find in Scripture are passages where both the Son and the Spirit are described in terms that can only be understood as God himself. It is such a passage as this that we come to today in our studies in the letter to the Colossians. These are the dramatic words of the apostle Paul:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."

That plainly states what Charles Wesley has captured in his phrase, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead seen." Paul brings this truth boldly to the Colossian believers for two basic reasons. As we have already seen, Paul is very concerned that these new Christians begin to grow up. They must not remain immature believers---born again, but still filled with all the frailty and foolishness of the flesh. They must grow up to become vigorous, exemplary, compassionate Christians, forsaking their apathy and hostility and becoming a blessing to the whole people. Paul is well aware that they are in danger of losing their clear vision of Christ. That is the nature of the Colossian heresy which attacked the person of Jesus. They were in danger, therefore, of losing their proper sense of the profound power and eminence of Jesus Christ in their own world.

Many Christians are like this today. Many true believers appear to have little sense that Jesus is alive and lives here and now. Some churches seem to treat Jesus as the British treat their monarch: they surround him with all political power, and do not expect the sovereign to do anything at all except to look good. They treat monarchs with great respect and reverence, and pay much lip service, but they really do not expect anything from them. That is the way Christians all too often treat the Lord Jesus. This passage calls us back to the fact of who Jesus is: simply, he is in charge of the universe!

The second reason why Paul includes this is his own unforgettable experience on the Damascus Road. As a young Saul of Tarsus he believed that Jesus of Nazareth was only a tub-thumping rabble-rouser who was causing a great deal of trouble in Israel. Saul considered him nothing more than a deliberate blasphemer who was claiming things about himself for which he ought to be put to death. As an ardent Pharisee Saul was full of the name of Jesus. Then came the experience on the Damascus Road. There, in the dust of the road, surrounded by a blinding light of glory, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In amazement and wonder he cried out, "Who are you, Lord?" and in the passage we are looking at today Paul states the answer he found to his own question: "He," says the apostle, "is the image of the invisible God, the Creator of all things." That Damascus event is what changed Paul's life.

This passage is a truly astounding claim. In these brief phrases the apostle points out Christ's nature as Creator, his work as Creator, and his continuing relationship to the worlds that he has made. Let us look at such claims. What does it mean that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God?" I have often described a little boy who was drawing pictures on the floor one day as his mother was working. She said to him, "What are you drawing?" He said, "I'm drawing a picture of God." "But no one knows what God looks like," she said. "They will when I get through!" the boy replied.

There is a rather profound truth in that story when it is applied to Jesus. It is as though that little baby in the manger in Bethlehem is a picture being drawn for us. It would be proper to say of that baby that when he finishes his life's work, men will know what God is like. That is what Jesus did. Today, if you come to know Jesus, you discover that in a remarkable way you have come also into the presence of God; you know God personally and intimately. That has always been the central claim of Christian conversion.

This sentence also includes a second phrase that is very descriptive: "The firstborn of all creation." What does that mean? Here is where many of the cults have had a heyday. Jehovah's Witnesses say that this phrase proves that Jesus was a created being and not God. That is the claim of several other cults as well. But what does that "firstborn of all creation" mean? That Jesus is the one born first, i. e. the first one to be created? No. In that in Greek the word that is translated here "firstborn" is used of Jesus himself in the Bethlehem story. Luke, in chapter 2, says that Mary brought forth her "firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes."

him in a manger." Thus, say the cults, the word "firstborn" clearly implies that Jesus is the first of children born to Mary. Scripture reveals there were other children born to her: the brothers and sisters who would come later. Used in that sense, of course, it would mean that Jesus is the first created thing. There is some sense to that argument.

But (and this is the important point) there are other meanings of the word. It is most frequently used as "firstborn" in the sense of heir, the owner, the possessor of creation. This is certainly the meaning intended here. I found myself recently standing next to Dr. Carl Henry, whom I regard as the greatest theologian of our day. Since I knew I would be preaching on this passage I took the occasion to ask him how he would translate this phrase. This was his answer: "It should be translated," he said, "'the Primeval Creator of all created things.'" Jesus is the one who possesses, as heir or owner, all other things.

This sense of the firstborn as owner or possessor is a concept that is strongly supported in the Bible. Esau, one of the twin sons of Isaac, was born first, therefore he had the right of the firstborn to the estate of his father. But through a strange series of events, Jacob, the other twin, tricked his father, conferring that blessing upon him. He stole from Esau, by trickery, the right of firstborn. Yet that was the will of God. The right to be firstborn was transferred from Esau to Jacob, and Jacob became the recipient of the promises of God to Isaac. Thus, we must understand that the one born first is not necessarily the "firstborn."

Jacob himself later had sons, one of whom was Joseph, who in turn had two sons whom he named Manasseh and Ephraim. At the end of his life, Jacob went down to Egypt to visit his son Joseph, and Joseph placed before him two boys, Manasseh, the firstborn, and Ephraim, the younger. Joseph placed Manasseh under Jacob's right hand, and Ephraim under his left hand, so that Manasseh would receive the blessing of the firstborn. But Jacob did a very unusual thing. We are not told why, but for some strange reason,

replies, "Woman, what have I to do with you?" That is not uttered unkindly. He is simply declaring request is not the motive for his actions. But he does act. And, as he declared in many places, he because the Father tells him to. Thus the initiation of this act is from the Father. The Father willed his Son appeared on earth there would be miracles that would accompany his appearance to support and establish his credentials among the sons of men.

Immediately our Lord began to plan the miracle. He said to the servants, "Fill these six empty jars. The servants did so. It must have taken fifteen or twenty minutes at least to fill those great thirty with water. Our Lord waited until they did. Then, without a word---I always appreciate this: there fanfare, no ostentation, no magic---without a word of command the water became wine. The Spirit changed the water into the finest of wine.

C.S. Lewis has a comment on this that is pertinent to our study:

If we open such books as Grimm's Fairy Tales or the Italian epics, we find ourselves in a world of miracles so diverse that they can hardly be classified. Beasts turn into men and men into beasts or trees. Trees talk, ships become goddesses, and a magic ring can cause tables richly spread with food to appear in solitary places. Now if such things really happened, they would, I suppose, show that nature was being invaded. But they would show that she was

Paul is saying, "You dispute much about the successive grades of angels. You distinguish each grade by its special title. You can tell how each order was generated from the preceding. You assign to each its proper degree of worship. Meanwhile you have ignored and have degraded Christ. I tell you it is not so. He is first and foremost, Lord of heaven and earth, above all thrones or dominations, all principedoms or powers; far above every dignity and every potentate---whether earthly or heavenly, whether angel or demon or man--- that evokes your reverence or excites your fear."

That is the supremacy of our Lord in his own world! Nothing can make us more confident and enable us to speak boldly of our faith than to bear in mind the tremendous truth that Jesus is Lord. He is in charge of all life. Nothing can happen in history or in space without his permission. He rules over the present and the future.

But creation is not only by him, it is also for him. It all operates for his honor and glory. A few decades ago Albert Einstein announced to the world a new view of space. He declared that space is not, as we have thought for centuries, a linear concept, extending outward in a straight line, but that it was curved upon itself. This is what this passage is proclaiming as well. Though creation originated with the Eternal Son---perhaps the "Big Bang"---it also converges again toward him in a great concentric cosmic cycle. Thus it is totally under his control. He is the reason why all things have been made. Eventually all the cosmos and all the events of history will find their place in the great purpose of the Father to honor and glorify the Son.

Verse 17 declares, in two marvelous phrases, just how Jesus controls space and history:

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

"He is before all things," means he is outside his own creation; he was there first. This describes the Son of God. As C.S. Lewis has pointed out, he is over creation as a King and a Sovereign, not just a part of it or part of it, but intimately related to it.

When Paul uses the phrase, "all things by him hold together," he is speaking of our Lord's power to sustain and to prevent breakdown. The scientists who work on the great linear accelerator at Stanford University, trying to smash the atom apart, know that it takes incredible power. Years ago I was taken to see the predecessor to today's linear accelerator, a relatively small instrument. The professor who took me there showed me the power source for it. I have never forgotten what he said: "The power to operate this instrument," he said, "is equivalent to all the electricity it takes to run the city of San Francisco." Yet it is a very small instrument.

Something holds the atom together with enormous, incredible power. That power, according to the Bible, is God (both here in Colossians and in the letter to the Hebrews) is vested in Jesus. He has the authority as Sovereign. He has the power to sustain, because he is the Eternal Son.

The great Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper, who was also the President of the Netherlands, put it this way:

When Jesus looks at his universe from his exalted throne at the right hand of the Father, and he sees the great galaxies whirling in space, the planets and the people upon this planet, and all the minute details of life here including the details of our individual lives, there is nothing that he sees anywhere of which he cannot say, "Mine!"

The most astonishing phenomenon today is to see men who work with this physical universe, who observe the beauty, order, and power inherent in the natural world as well as in the world of human beings, who fail to see the Power behind it all; the ordered Intelligence that possesses and originates all things. They do not understand how a man like Carl Sagan can work in the field of astronomy, knowing of the dangers that are now coming to light in the universe, and yet go on breathing air which God has supplied, eating food with which God has stocked this earth, and relying moment by moment on a heartbeat whose continuation rests in the will of Someone other than himself, yet can busy himself telling us that our problems matter! It is a phenomenon beyond my understanding.

One of the most profound incidents in the gospels is the story of Jesus and the rich young ruler. century yuppie, expensively dressed, very wealthy, young and handsome, knelt at the feet of this peasant from Galilee and said, "Lord, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus looked into the young man and saw the hunger and emptiness of it. Wealth had brought him no lasting pleasure; anguish and the desire for something more. He tested him as to whether he understood the Law saw that the young man was in earnest about finding the secret of life, he told him to do an unusual thing and sell everything you have and give to the poor and come and follow me."

We usually focus upon the first part of that command: "Go and sell all you have and give to the poor." We say that what Jesus is teaching is that it is wrong to be wealthy. But this is answered by the fact that Jesus had many friends among the wealthy of his own day, yet he never rebuked them for their wealth. That is not the story. What Jesus is saying is, "Your money keeps you from seeing what you desperately need in life, for it is blocking what you really need in life." And then he makes clear what that is: "Come and follow me." What the young man lacked was a King! He had no final authority beyond himself, no cause that he could give even his life. He had no anchor in life.

As I think of the world in which we live today surely this is the reason for the terrible sense of loss that we feel as a people. We are a generation adrift. We have thrown out all the absolutes, and found ourselves adrift in a tossing ocean of life. No one has an anchor any more. What men desperately need is a King, a God, a final Authority, an Anchor to cling to. I am convinced we will never solve the terrible drug traffic until we find a King among people that there is an answer to the hunger and anguish of their empty lives. We cannot stop this by simply confiscating all the drugs that come into this country. Drugs are merely a symptom of the hunger and anguish of people; of their empty lives, their lack of a sense of worth. They have no King to worship, no authority to serve, no cause greater than themselves.

Thus the central truth of our faith, and one that makes for strength in the Christian life, is this truth that we have found the center of life. "He is the image of the invisible God...the Creator of all things, who is before all things and holds all things in his hand and power." Is he your Lord?

There has been a chorus running through my mind all week as I have been preparing this message. It is a hymn I used to sing in the early days of PBC, but I do not hear it much any more. The words are simple and direct, and say themselves:

My wonderful Lord, my wonderful Lord,
By angel and seraphs in heaven adored.
I bow at Thy shrine, my Savior Divine,
My wonderful, wonderful Lord!

No distant Lord have I,
Loving afar to be;
Made flesh for me
He cannot rest
Until He rests in me.

I need not journey far
This dearest friend to see;
Companionship is always mine, He makes His home with me.

I envy not the twelve,
Nearer to me is He;
The life He once lived here on earth
He lives again in me.

Ascended now to God
My witness there to be,

His witness here am I because
His Spirit dwells in me.

O glorious Son of God,
Incarnate Deity,
I shall forever be with Thee
Because Thou art with me.

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Colossians 1:15-17
Third Message
December 14, 1986

THE REASON FOR THE SEASON

by Ray C. Stedman

Most scholars feel that the magnificent description of Christ found in verses 15-20 of Colossians is an early Christian hymn which Paul is quoting. These verses may represent the very first of all Christian carols. If so; it is a hymn of two stanzas. The first concerns Jesus as Lord of creation, i.e. the material universe, and all forces at work within it. The second stanza speaks of Jesus as Lord of the new humanity. We have lost the tune for this hymn, but we still have these words which focus upon the Lord's overall supremacy.

Here are Paul's words:

"He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

The church, of course, is the new creation. It is healthy to remind ourselves of that because many seem to forget it. The church is something eternally new which the world has never seen before. It is different from any other organization or organism among men. It is a sad thing to observe the loss of this concept among Christians. As I travel about I have noted the way people think about their church. The most widespread concept is that the church is a religious country club, operated for the benefit of the members; it makes its own rules and exists for its own purposes. That is a far cry from the New Testament description of the church.

Others look upon the church as a collection of emotional misfits who are waiting for the first bus to come. I fear some of us give them good reason to think that! Then there are those, like the Colossians, who are of eager beaver religious fanatics, running after every new doctrine that comes along, especially if it gives a good feeling and has a sense of magic and mystery about it. That to many is the church.

But here the apostle corrects these false ideas and declares that Jesus is the Head of the body, the church. Paul relates the two together as a head and trunk relate in a physical body. This is one of the most important statements in the New Testament about the church. God has actually given us a model of how the church should function around with us (our own body), so that we may understand how the church is to function. The church is a body, and we all have bodies. The church has a Head, and we too have heads. To understand the church and how it should function, think about your own body and how it functions.

If you stand in front of a mirror you will notice, I hope, that there are two divisions of the body. The head is on top, with more or less hair, we call the head. It is the control center of the body. The rest of the body, including its appendages of arms and legs, etc., is all part of the trunk.

That is a body---and the head runs the body! Many churches seem to forget that. Think what would happen to your body if somebody removed your head. It doesn't appear that any of you has had that experience. Most of you seem to be well attached. When I was a boy growing up in Montana, we did not buy

everything he had and bought it."

This is most instructive if you remember how a pearl is made. A pearl, you know, starts out as an irritated oyster! A grain of sand gets under the oyster's shell. To the oyster that feels like crackers us. It is very uncomfortable, and the oyster sets about getting rid of it. What it does is to cover the grain of sand with a beautiful nacre that hardens into a lustrous and gorgeous pearl. That is how the pearl was born. It emerges from the wounded side of Jesus. It was the irritation that we represent by our sin that put him to death, and he covers it over and heals it, making it into a beautiful pearl of great value.

blood, shed on the cross."

Notice how carefully the apostle links together the reconciling work of Christ and his deity. Jesus is God to do what he did! At the Chicago Conference on Biblical Application which I mentioned last week, I was thrilled to hear Dr. Bruce Waltke make an impassioned plea that we who are working with these great truths of Scripture find some way to reduce these theological statements to contemporary terms, because "the world is lost without a sense of God. Men and women everywhere desperately need to know someone in charge of life, and that there is a Source to whom they can turn for help and for deliverance. The world needs to know that Jesus Christ is God." He made the statement personal with these words: "If Jesus is not God, then I do not have a Savior." That is surely true. If Jesus is not God there is no bridge to span the chasm between God and man.

This is why Christianity is often offensive to people of other faiths. They say, "Why can't you recognize that all religions have leaders who can lead us into truth? Why do you claim that Jesus is different and better than others?" That is often called "the scandal of exclusivity," the exclusive claim that only one religious leader can lead to truth, both God and man. As C. S. Lewis well states, If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, "Are you

The basic meaning of this word is "to remove all impediments to peace" so that harmony prevails.

What does it mean, then, that Jesus shall "reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven"? It means a day is coming when the hostility of evil against righteousness will be brought to a halt. Evil men and angels will find themselves unable to function in their enmity against God. They will be subdued, and will cease their rebellion. It does not mean their punishment ends; it is their active hostility that will cease. Then, at last, the terrible question that every one of us has asked at times, "Why does evil exist?" will be answered. There is coming a day, according to this verse, when all will be explained to us. Why do the good suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does injustice reign triumphant? Why are innocent children raped, tortured, and killed, or ruined in mind and body by drugs or molesters? Why were six million Jews gassed to death in Germany? Why were millions of others elsewhere slaughtered, speared, drowned, burned or hanged by the tyrants of history? Why?

We have all asked these questions. Why do accidents occur, ruining our joys? Why does insanity ravage so many? At last this question is to be answered. At last we will learn why it was necessary to allow suffering. We will see it was part of the working out of God's program. Every hurt will be resolved, every tear wiped away, every pain will be relieved. At last the whole universe will live in peace and harmony with one another. "Nothing shall hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain." Read the great promises of Isaiah with regard to the new Jerusalem. What glorious language he employs to picture an earth where nothing is out of step, nothing is out of balance; everything is in harmony with everything else. That is what the apostle Paul is describing in that great passage in Philippians. An hour is coming when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." That hour in our history is headed.

The marvelous thing about this is that it flows out of the death of Jesus on the cross. It is the cross that has brought this to pass. That is why it has been the central symbol of Christian faith since the very beginning.

THE GREAT MYSTERY

by Ray C. Stedman

You have all seen the television commercial for the Armed Forces that says---to a musical accompaniment---"Be all that you can be." It implies that if you join the Army, the Navy, the Air Force or Marines, then you can be all that you can be. I don't believe that! Does anybody? But a word like that has a strong appeal. Everybody wants to be all that he can be. I have never met anyone who doesn't want that; that he feels himself capable of being. We all hunger for that. No matter how degraded, downcast, frustrated, everyone longs for fulfillment. And yet, as we observe the bewildering tragedy of human life, we are left shaking our heads at the seeming impossibility of that. I have been listening to stories all over the world, relatives, friends, and on the media, describing endless shame, hurt, pain, murder, divorce, cruelty, and personal failure. Is there any real possibility of reversing this in someone's life? Can the downward spiral be arrested?

The good news of the gospel answers with a resounding Yes! It can be done! In fact, that is what Paul is saying here in his letter to the Colossians. This is what I would call a first century description of how a life can be changed:

"Once you alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation--- if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel." (Colossians 1:21-23)

What a marvelous thing to find hope like that in this dark world of ours! And how wonderful that God undertakes to make this change! I read this morning a statement from a man who felt he heard God speak to him one day, "I wish you would leave all this reconciling of things to me, since you are so hopeless and unequipped for it, and that you would use whatever influence you have with your fellow fussers and complainers to do likewise. I know what I am doing and I will go over it with you when you get home."

That is a good word for us to remember. God is at work. He is sovereign. And he can and does reach out to people to himself and make a change in their lives. This passage, from verse 21 on through the end of the chapter, is a tremendous description of the process of change in a human being. It traces it in the steps of a journey. I propose that we consider them this morning.

First, there is a beginning that involves an inner reversal of attitude. A total change of outlook occurs when you come into contact personally with the Savior himself. As Paul states here, there was a time when we who are now Christians were "alienated from God." We did not have any use for God. We did not value him into our reckoning. We did not consider him important. We started and ended each day without a thought to him. We went about our own plans, lived for ourselves, and did what we felt like doing, never giving a thought to God. Or if we did think of him, we regarded him as merely a remote Being on the horizon, but we never expected anything from him. Because we cut him out of our thinking---even though he was sustaining our very life---we ended up, as Paul describes, "enemies in our minds," hostile toward him. We did not want anything to do with him. You remember how that felt, don't you? We avoided God. We knew he would interfere with our plans; that he was a cosmic killjoy out to make us live uneventful and meaningless lives. We were not open to him in any degree whatsoever. We were enemies of God, and as a result we expressed that enmity in evil behavior.

That is really what this text says. The translation, "because of your evil behavior," is a very poor one. It sounds as though evil behavior is the cause of inner alienation and hostility toward God. But it is the other way around. It is inner alienation, estrangement from God and hostility toward him, that caused the evil behavior. That is what the Greek text clearly declares here.

"But now," Paul says, "we are reconciled to God." Something has happened within us. It occurred when we saw that the death of Jesus was for us, that somehow he had done something to set aside our sin, our brokenness and hurt, and that if we came to him in faith he would deliver us. So we came. So something happened then to our inner attitude. We were changed in the way we thought. We no longer saw God as an enemy and a Judge, but as a loving Father. We recognized that the cross was not a symbol of failure of a religious fanatic, but it was a moment when the great enemies all men face were conquered; sin was overcome and all the evil powers against mankind were set at naught. Thus our whole life was

Just this past week I received a letter from a man describing the change that occurred in his life. An excerpt from it:

I visited your office about four and one-half years ago at the request of my wife. When I met with you I was away from my wife and planning to divorce. After meeting with you I listened to many of your tapes and read several of your books and through this and other Christian materials I developed at least a vague sense of the personal nature of God and that he does not hate divorce. Out of a guilty conscience I moved back into my home, with my wife. I truly did not believe I could ever love my wife again and that my life would be forever miserable, but the guilt of leaving was so great I had to stay.

After I had been home for about six months, during which time my wife encouraged me to attend church and Bible study, the Lord saved me and demonstrated his love for me. In a moment of surrender he freed me from drugs and alcohol. I had been drinking a quart of whiskey per day for years, and my health clearly revealed it. Since that time my love relationship with Jesus has continually grown. As the world views it, my life has totally fallen apart. I have lost my business and everything our family has ever owned in the last three years. The world does not know what I and my family know. Our riches are no longer in things (the created). Our riches are in the Creator. He is our Rock. He is faithful and he will deliver us and we only desire that our will be in conformity to his will.

He has given us a wonderful peace of heart, joy in our spirits and the strength to bear up under whatever circumstances he allows to mold us into conformity to his character. I have found in my wife everything I had ever hoped to have in a wife, and the Holy Spirit has encouraged me for some time now to share with you this wonderful miracle worked by God through you his servant and others like you.

That clear testimony confirms what the apostle says to the Colossians. God is in the business of changing lives. That is what this good news is about. If you need your life changed, that is where you start.

The process of change begins, as we have seen, with opening the heart to Christ, and receiving him. But it is a process that is headed for a specific goal, which, according to the apostle, is "to present [whole, complete, well balanced in spirit, soul and body] in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." That is God's goal, and he fully intends to accomplish it. The sign that it is happening is, "if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel." It is continuing that is the process. (goso the ape against the) Tj k. In fulfillment

"I'm going to quit being a Christian. It's too hard. I don't want to pay the price." I said to him, "I told you what you ought to do." There was a long silence for a moment, then he said, "You know I can't do it. I knew he could not, and he did not, for it is continuing that is the proof of reality."

The second step is the realization of the part others play in this process of change. Listen to these words:

"This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness..."

One of the remarkable things that Christians learn is that others have had a part in bringing the gospel to us. Oftentimes that part was played long before we ever came to Christ, but when we learn of it we are often moved. I will never forget the Methodist evangelist who preached to me when I was a boy ten years old. I remember to this day the text he preached from because when I heard the gospel from him I came to Christ.

but for the sins of the whole world." There is nothing lacking there!

But when we are engaged in fighting against the opposition of the devil and his angels, when we by the lusts of the flesh and face the subtle lies and deceptions of the world around us, then we

good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

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Colossians 1:21-29
Fifth Message
December 28, 1986

THE OVERFLOWING LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

The end of a year always brings news articles that highlight the events of the past year. I read the article entitled "The Most Boring People of 1986." Some may place me in that category, but at least I was included in this article. A group calling themselves "The Boring Institute of New Jersey" picks the most boring people of the year every December. You may be interested to know that in 1984 Michael Jackson was the "Yawn of the Year," primarily because of his over-exposure in the media. In 1985 it was Dr. Ruth

order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

The apostle's purpose for writing is stated very clearly there. He specifically wants to enrich their understanding, encourage their hearts, and enable love to spread throughout the congregation.

But do not overlook the process! There is an unfortunate chapter division here that separates verse 28 from the closing verse of chapter 1. These two verses actually belong together. In verse 29 of chapter 1, Paul writes, "For this end I labor [or, I toil], struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me. And I want you to know how strenuously I am exerting myself for you..." Notice how he calls attention to the effort he was putting into this matter of bringing the Colossian Christians into vitality, excitement, and a new adventure.

You may ask, how could a man who is chained to a Roman guard day and night, in the city of Rome, a thousand miles from Colossae, so toil as to help the Colossians? Paul does not tell us here but elsewhere we are given ample information as to his method. Earlier in this letter he talked about laboring continually and praying for them. That is one way he toils for them---through frequent prayer.

I want to stress again the tremendous importance of praying for one another. You can do all the things to help someone, but if his attitude is wrong nothing you do will serve to assist him. What can change your attitude toward your praying for him! Prayer can change the heart and mind, the inner attitude. It is a powerful force that can transform an atmosphere and make something acceptable when otherwise it would appear to be completely uninteresting. Paul prayed ("agonized" is the word) for these Colossian Christians over and over again though he had not personally met most of them. Also, it is evident from his letters that he was always a word of information about them. When Epaphras brought news to the apostle in Rome about the Colossians at Colossae, Paul questioned him and extracted from him all the information he could in order that he would know how to pray for the Colossians. That is an indication of his special concern for them.

But probably the most strenuous toil of the apostle on behalf of the Colossians was to compose these letters. These are extremely powerful and thoughtful letters. They are not something he dashed off in a moment of effort although he had a marvelous mind and was capable of tremendous spontaneous statements of truth. They reveal that much thought had gone into them. When did he have time to think? I have always felt that Paul worked through these deep theological statements on occasions when he was unable to sleep at night. That happens with me. When I can't sleep I often start thinking about a passage of Scripture that I am studying and insights come in the quiet hours of the night that I never seem to get during the daytime hours. I am able to work through a whole message and outline it in those night hours. Then I go back to bed and usually sleep peacefully till dawn. Perhaps Paul found his chain made sleep difficult and he used those night hours for difficult mental toil.

Notice that Paul's immediate goal is to encourage the hearts of the Colossians and to unite them in love. I confess I am rebuked by that, because too often I find myself ready to jump on someone and try to correct him out on the spot. It is a great lesson to see how Paul seeks to lift their spirits first and to cause them to appreciate one another. It indicates that building a relationship with individuals is the true way to help them. Have you ever tried to help someone, only to find your efforts fell on deaf ears? The apostle indicates the right way to help is to find something encouraging to say first. None of us like to be corrected by a negative approach. We first need a word of encouragement, as the apostle so beautifully demonstrated.

Then, when the apostle has lifted their spirits, they will be able, he suggests, to experience the excitement of understanding the mystery, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Occasionally I meet people who seem to be turned on constantly by Scripture. They discover a new, fresh verse every morning. But other people find the Bible dull and boring. That is probably because they have not fully understood what it is saying. When you grasp what the word of God is saying on how to handle life it becomes exciting. It puts zest into your life. It gives you the sense that you are not alone, that you don't have to handle your problems by yourself. You don't have to lean heavily on human advice, though God often provides help in that way. The question is, are you reckoning upon the wisdom of your Lord? He put you in a certain situation and he will provide the wisdom as you turn to his Word. Out of that Word come wisdom and understanding.

I ran across a quote last week that puts this well:

Why is it that the older one grows, the more topsy-turvy the wisdom of Christ appears, and yet the more it appears to be wisdom? He seems to be looking at life upside-down. He tells us that the poor have security, the mourners will be happy, the sexually deprived will be fulfilled. It seems, by the wisdom of this world, as if he got everything the wrong way around. But live a little bit, and one discovers that this is not necessarily the case at all. If the world is inverted, then the only way to see it clearly is upside-down.

This is why the Scriptures are different than any other book. They say things that are difficult and impractical, and yet are the very essence of realism, wisdom and sanity. For instance, in Romans 12 the apostle Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." Have you ever been stuck in traffic? It looks like an impractical solution, but if you try it you discover you have touched on something you did not know was there. You will have a different attitude to irritations. You will be relaxed and cannot get upset so easily. You can get through the commute hour a lot easier. That is the wisdom Paul is talking about. It is not to stuff your mind with theological ideas, but to discover the secret of how to handle life. It is how to stay sane and sober, joyful and thankful, in the midst of the pressures and difficulties of life.

A second reason for Paul's concern is that he is very much aware of how easy it is to miss these treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ by being misled by false teaching. In these verses we get the first clear hint of what was threatening the Colossian Christians.

"I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is."

"Fine-sounding arguments" reveal Paul's concern lest they be easily deceived. This is one of the major problems all Christians must face. The word for "deceived," literally translated, is "to reason beside something." If the target is the truth, there is something alongside it that looks very much like the truth. One begins to focus upon that, rather than the truth. That is one of the favorite weapons of the devil. The deceived is to think you know that something is right, but it is really wrong. Truth and error look very much the same, but one is a counterfeit. In these days when we have so many counterfeit and imitation things, we are used to being deceived and do not feel alarmed about it any more. Plastic looks like metal. Silk looks like silk. We are daily touching things that are but imitations of the real thing. But imitations have limitations. If you start regarding them as real you are in trouble. That is what Paul is worried about. A quotation from J. I. Packer puts this very well:

Sad experience shows that bad theology infects the heart with misbelief and unbelief, the spiritual equivalents of multiple sclerosis! Many who ran well have been progressively paralyzed through ingesting bad theology, and the danger remains. Theological expertise can feed intellectual pride, turning one into a person who cares more for knowing true notions than for knowing the true God, and that is disastrous, too.

Our churches are filled with people who are being misled in this very way. On this past New Year's Eve there was a movement to gather all Christians across this country into churches to chant a meditation. It was a world-wide shift in consciousness from war to peace, in 1987. That sounds admirable, and many participated. What was not known, however, was that the words to be chanted included such phrases as:

I begin with me. I am a living soul and the Spirit of God dwells in me, as me. I and the Father are one. All that the Father has is mine. In truth, I am the Christ of God.

Do you see how misleading that is? It sounds right at the outset, referring as it does to "the Spirit dwelling in me." Then the two words are added, "as me." That is, I myself am the Spirit of God. And then there comes the not particularly original blasphemy, "In truth, I am the Christ of God." Such prayers sound good on the surface. They appear to offer freedom---they may deliver for awhile---but soon there

decreasing pleasure, increasing bondage and, ultimately, disaster and death. This is the progress of the modern world. It is the story of drug addiction, alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, homosexuality and gambling. They seem to offer something new and exciting, but when practiced they invariably destroy, leaving one at last empty, and despairing.

This is also true of personal ambition, the lust for power, love of fame, and pride of race or position.

Christ and those strong roots will hold you. Secondly, you have been "built up" in him. Not only are you going deep, but you are growing up as well. You are increasing in faith and experience. And, thirdly, you have been "strengthened" in the faith. You have tested it, put it to work in your home, in your neighborhood. You have had to face problems which were tests, and your faith was strengthened by them.

As those three things take place, we are to add one more: we are to be "overflowing with thankfulness." Be grateful to God for everything he has given you, no matter what it is. Have you learned yet to be grateful for everything? That means you do not grumble, complain and criticize. You cannot have it both ways. Being thankful means to find something in every situation for which you can genuinely be grateful.

The great Bible commentator, Dr. Matthew Henry, once was robbed as he walked along a highway. When he told his friends there were four things for which he gave thanks. First, he was grateful that he had never been robbed before. After many years of life this was the first time he had been robbed and for that he was grateful. Secondly, he said, "Though they took all my money, I am glad they did not get very much of it." That was something to be thankful for. Thirdly, he said, "Though they took my money, they did not take my life, and I am grateful for that." And finally, he suggested, "I am thankful that it was I who was robbed and not the man who robbed." There was a man who had learned how to be "overflowing with thankfulness!"

Have you ever learned to talk to yourself and ask yourself questions? If you read the Psalms you will find you are listening to a man talking to himself. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why are thou disquieted within me?" The psalmist is standing at the mirror shaving, feeling blue, and asking himself, "What's the matter with you? Why are you like this?" That is a good thing to do.

When you ask yourself questions about yourself you must also ask, why didn't worse things happen to you beyond what has occurred and realize it could have been much worse. Then discover all the things God has supplied and which you have been taking for granted: his care, his love, the shelter of your home, the fact that you have a little money in the bank, the fact that your children love you, or your parents love you (whatever fits your situation), and begin to give thanks for those. If you do, something will happen. You will find yourself turned on about everything. You will find life filled with zest, vitality and excitement. You have discovered the answer to boredom!

Catalog No. 4024
Colossians 2 :1-7
Sixth Message

Let us begin our study with the eighth verse:

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

There is much packed into that short verse. The apostle obviously sees these Colossian Christians has commended and encouraged up to this point in the letter, as facing a great danger of being taken captive by false teaching. Actually the word is "kidnapped." They are in danger of being kidnapped by error. To this up to date, we would say they were in danger of being taken hostage! That is something we see about in our day. In several parts of the world today, ordinary American tourists may suddenly find themselves taken hostage and denied their rightful liberties as Americans. Paul sees a like danger for Christians who are taken captive by wrong philosophy, wrong teaching, false doctrine. Such can occur to believers of their Christian liberty and hold them hostage for years, if not for the rest of their lives.

The weapon that is used to do this is philosophy. That sounds rather harmless. After all, philosophy is simply "the love of wisdom." What could be wrong with loving wisdom? We are all much indebted to philosophers of the past, to Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and others, for their keen insights into the nature of reality and life. The love of wisdom is a good thing in many cases. There are good and bad philosophies. What the apostle has in mind here, of course, is the danger the Colossians are facing of being seduced by false philosophy.

What was wrong with the philosophy that endangered them? First, says the apostle, it was "hollow and empty teaching." When they got to the heart of the teaching he is referring to they would discover

opening statement Mr. Edelen took the position that Jesus was nothing but a good man. Here is what he said to the interviewer:

The book that I'm reading right now is *Jesus in History and Jesus in Mythology*. This is a compilation of an international symposium. Scholars from all over the world all met and presented papers. In those papers, there's a definite separation between a historical person named Jesus and the Christ mythology that built up around that person that is a continuation of a mythological diffusion.

What I'm saying right now is not just Bill Edelen giving his opinion, because when I taught at the University of Puget Sound, every one of my colleagues in the Department of Religion would not only fully agree with what I'm saying right now, but this is what they taught. And I also think that it's safe to say that what I'm saying would be accepted in any major university or departments of religion in this country. They do look upon Christianity as being saturated with Zoroastrian (early Persian) mythology. And Christianity as being saturated with Egyptian mythology and with Babylonian mythology.

Do you recognize his tactic? He is attempting to make it appear that the finest minds and the best are convinced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Christianity is a myth, and that it is only a tiny number of blind fundamentalists who believe otherwise.

The interviewer went on to ask Edelen about David Roper's central point: that Christmas is a celebration of Christ, or God incarnate, being born (whether on December 25th or another date). They asked, "Do you believe that Christ is God incarnate when he was born?" Here is Mr. Edelen's answer:

No, I don't believe that literally, at all...Albert Schweitzer, here's one of our great scholars of all time, and Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus* is still considered as a classic in the field...Schweitzer said that Jesus claimed none of the things that the church or theologians have claimed for him over the centuries...Schweitzer said to live in the spirit of love is to live in the spirit of Jesus, which is to be a Christian. And Schweitzer said being a Christian doesn't have to do with believing anything. Some people say you have to believe these doctrines or these creeds before you can be a Christian. Well, the doctrines and creeds are all man-made.

That is "The Gospel according to Schweitzer." Do you see how it confirms what the apostle says? This generation theological error takes this form. An attempt is always made to make it appear that biblical Christianity is a minority faith, held by only a few ill-educated, almost mentally deficient people, with no basis in scholarship for what they believe. I do not have time to share with you David's answer to the question but I assure you it was very adequate. By the end of the debate the reporter was obviously on his hands and knees in what a confirmation of what the apostle says. "Hollow and deceptive philosophy" rests on human wisdom. That is what is wrong. It sets aside the revelation of God, disclosing himself to his people, and undermines that revelation by claiming superiority for the guesses and conclusions of the inadequate mind of man.

The second thing that Paul charges is wrong with "hollow and deceptive philosophy" is that it depicts the "basic principles of this world." There is a debate among the scholars as to whether that is a proper translation. The word for "principles" here or, as it is sometimes translated, "elements," literally means "things" or "a series of things." The word became associated with the alphabet because letters in an alphabet are arranged up in a row. One learns a language by first learning the ABC's. Thus, some scholars feel that this represents something rudimentary, simple and elementary---basic principles, that is the idea.

Other scholars, however, point out that this word is also used with reference to an army of soldiers standing in a row, in ranks, as in a hierarchy. These scholars feel that this is a reference to the fallen angels; a parallel passage to Paul's statement in Ephesians 6, "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and wicked spirits in high places," whom he also calls "the rulers of this darkness." In Galatians he calls them "weak and beggarly elements" and clearly states the Galatian error: "those which by nature are not gods."

Which view is right? Are these rudimentary, fundamental or elementary principles of life? Or are they the teaching of "the world rulers of this present darkness?" My view is that both viewpoints are true when a scriptural phrase has a double meaning, both meanings are intended. Perhaps that is true of the philosophies that Paul describes (or any erroneous philosophy in the realm of religion or the spirit world) as a description of what Paul calls in 2 Timothy "doctrines of demons." They are elementary, rudimentary philosophies perpetuated by demonic powers among human beings, which have the effect of returning people to childish actions and childish views of life.

Have you ever noticed how easily grownups can begin to act like children? Such actions offend us and are disparagingly, "Oh, don't be so childish." Until, of course, we behave the same way. Then we justify our behavior on some other basis. See what happens, for instance, when you set a plate of cake in front of a group of children? They all grab for the biggest piece. But take a special stock option and make it available to a group of businessmen, and they too will grab for the biggest piece. They act like children. Observe how ladies behave at a special sale, where real bargains are being offered. They are like children.

Children love to show off. They are forever strutting about, seeking to get your attention and telling you of their past accomplishments. They want you to be aware of them. But have you heard grownups tell you of theirs? Of course you have. It is rudimentary, elementary, childish conduct. Children love to dominate other children around and tell them what to do. Grownups love to do that too. Children easily squabble and

debate with us. I will never forget the tension, the dynamism of those meetings. People could hardly hear the preliminaries were over and we started the message. I had done my homework and studied their arguments. I quoted them and answered their claims with quotes from the Bible, and tried to show their error. I opened it up for discussion and we argued back and forth. Things got very tense. As I look back on it, however, I have to say that I do not think anybody's mind was changed. In fact, I probably helped them go to the other side because I made them look like underdogs. Everyone felt sorry for them, and people ended up believing the error more than believing what I had said.

That is not the best way to answer erroneous doctrine: Look at what Paul does. He reviews for the Corinthians what they already have in Jesus. He calls them back to the truth and sets it vividly before them. Here are five wonderful statements, the first of which is found in verses 9 and 10:

"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have this fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority."

Everywhere in Scripture you will find this approach: We are to be "...looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." We must focus again upon who he is, then the mind and heart are both protected from the assault of an evil teaching. Here the apostle reminds the Colossians that they already have everything they need if they have Jesus. They have God for "in Christ dwells all the fullness of Deity in bodily form." God is present when Jesus is there. This does not mean that Jesus is both the Father and the Son. Scripture never teaches that. But "the fullness of God," the whole Godhead, comes into your life when you have Jesus. What more do you need? That is Paul's question. What more can these false teachers add to you? A new experience, what other additional divine person can you receive than what you have already received when you have Jesus? It may be that we need to discover more of what it means to have Christ in our lives. That is a lifelong process. We shall always be growing in appreciation of what it means to have him in our lives. The point is (and it is a very important one): you do not need anything more than you already have. You need to understand more of what you have received. That is where Paul begins his response.

Having made the statement that they have, in Christ, already received all that God is, and nothing more to be added, Paul now traces how this happened to them. In these next four statements he tells how they have been filled in the fullness of God in Christ. First, he declares, they were circumcised with him:

"In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of your sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ."

That is an astonishing statement. Many scholars equate circumcision with baptism, holding that baptism has taken the place of the Old Testament rite of circumcision. But if you look carefully at the text, it is clear that this is not true. If we are Christians, says Paul, we have been both circumcised and baptized. Thus, they are not the same thing.

I will never forget an incident that occurred a number of years ago here at the church. A young man came to my office carrying a thick Bible under his arm, which he had been reading. Looking at me very earnestly, he said to me, "Would you circumcise me?" After I had picked myself up from the floor, I explained to him why, one, he did not need physical circumcision, and, two, what circumcision meant. I pointed out that it was an eloquent symbol when it was properly understood.

Because circumcision is a minor surgical operation on the male sex organ it has been a subject that many people have avoided. That is too bad, since God ordained both the operation and the organ upon which it would be performed. Thus, it makes sense to understand what he is saying to us by means of circumcision. For centuries, males have equated their manhood with their sex organs. Certain ribald remarks you hear from time to time confirm that. It is not strange, really, that it should be so because it reflects an instinctive understanding, that in some sense the male sex organ stands for the man himself. God determined it so. At birth the male organ is covered with a loose cap of flesh. That covering symbolizes the hidden male ego, suppressed and disguised. It suggests that what a man really is in his innermost is covered over; but it is there. What that is is expressed by the Spanish word "macho." Macho stands for confidence in one's own ability; it means self-centered egoism. That is what we have become in the

Neither do we need to believe them! If we understand who we are in Christ, and what we have in

Food restrictions, special diets, observance of special ceremonies and days obviously arose out of practices. God gave them many of these ceremonies in the Old Testament as shadows, pictures. The danger was that people were performing these rituals mechanically, simply going through the motions. The Apostle Paul says, "The law, which says, can destroy the true vitality of faith. These particular religious ceremonies were rituals concerning the year, the month and the week. The "New Moon" was a monthly observance, and the "Sabbath Day" course, came every week.

We find a parallel to these observances today whenever people place a special value on religious practices. It has not been very long since the Catholic church relented on its restriction against eating meat during Lent. That was an example of a diet restriction, designed to impart a religious value to life. Many Protestants abstain from pleasurable activities during Lent, the forty-day period preceding Easter, because they think that will improve their relationship with God. Others seek to do that by wearing special clothing or a uniform. Many Jews keep a kosher kitchen although many of them do not even know why. When my wife asked a Jewish woman in a Jewish neighborhood why she kept a kosher kitchen she replied, "I don't know. It is just part of our religion. I do something she felt she had to do, although she could see no value in it.

In the early part of this century hardly any Christians who were evangelicals would travel on a Sunday. They were taught that Sunday was a carry-over of the Jewish Sabbath and that it was wrong to work on that day. Those of you who saw the movie "Chariots of Fire" know how strongly that view was held. This is the kind of thing that Paul is talking about here. Others today chant a mantra without any thought of what they are saying, or sit for long periods contemplating their navel. I have never been able to understand how that improves one in any way at all! Still others turn a prayer wheel or finger religious beads, etc. Any religious performance that is done without meaning or personal significance falls into the category of shadows described here.

But somebody is bound to say, "Wait a minute. Aren't some of these observances given to us by God to remind us of truth? Isn't there some value to mental or physical health to be gained by doing them?" The apostle answers that objection in verse 17. These rituals, he declares, are a mere "shadow of the reality that was to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." Once the reality has been realized, shadows have no value whatsoever. Shadows are pictures, given in advance, designed to prepare us for something. When you have found Christ, you do not need the shadows any more. Paul even includes the Sabbath day as a shadow.

I carry with me pictures of my wife, my children and my grandchildren. I take them along in order to show them to people who try to show their pictures to me! I value these photographs and look at them occasionally when I am away from home. But what would you think if I propped up these pictures all over my house and tried to relate to them? You would think I had lost my mind---and I probably would have. More than that, I would certainly soon lose touch with the very people whose pictures I treasure. They would feel ignored and would probably ultimately leave me and all relationships would cease.

That is what Paul says is wrong with shadows. If you still place primary value on a shadow after the reality has come you destroy your participation in the value of that reality. Now the reality, here, is Jesus Christ, the center of all life and the source of excitement in a Christian's experience. He is the One who accompanies us through life, to comfort in times of need and strengthen when we are being tempted. He is a place we can run to when we are troubled or uncertain about life. To lose him is to lose all source of excitement and joy in life. That is the danger in observing shadows. That is why this paragraph begins with the word "But." The previous section pointed out all that Christ is to us now. Thus Paul is saying, "Having him, then, do not let anyone spoil you by involving you in a mechanical performance that will cancel out the reality."

Joining a cult is not the only way to let ritualism ruin your life. You can do it right here at church on Sunday morning. If you merely mouth the words of the hymns when you sing, you are doing this very thing. It destroys something, entering into a religious mechanical performance that not only says nothing but also destroys something in you. If you let your mind wander when someone is praying, if you do not focus on the prayer and silently say, "Amen," or let that prayer reflect what you are thinking, you will turn off much of the power of the prayer and miss much. You are indulging in a form of hypocrisy; of looking like you are doing something valuable and helpful when actually you are not doing anything like that at all.

Turning your mind off during a message and failing to hear what is being said falls into the same category. When I look out from this platform you all appear to be listening. You look at me and your faces react in what I am saying. But I know from sad experience that that is not always true. Some of you are worrying about how the roast is doing. Some of you are playing golf, or working out a business deal, or struggling with a problem with your children, or wondering about what someone else is wearing. It is interesting to know at the end of a service where everybody has been! We all find our attention scattered at times, but do not let yourself get into a habit of that because it is destructive; it is empty ritualism.

I would like to ask two questions before we pass on to the next point. First, do you really think God is pleased by that kind of performance? What a low view of God, to think that if we run through some religious ritual he is going to be pleased with us! There must be a dozen passages in the Old Testament that tell us what he thinks of that kind of thing. I do not have time to read them to you, but let me share one out of Isaiah which illustrates what God says:

"When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Bring no more futile sacrifices. Incense is an abomination to me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths and the calling of assemblies are a futile burden. I cannot endure any longer."

What an honest revelation that is of what we are doing to God when we act with thoughtless involvement in public worship.

My second question is: do you have any idea of what you lose by this kind of a performance? The first loss that becomes apparent is that the service itself grows dull and boring. You find yourself wanting to leave, but you feel you have to stay because your mate or your family expects it, or you gain a reputation for doing so. When a group of people do that, church does become terribly dull. A church service ought to be a tremendously exciting time. Here is where we ought to find ourselves stimulated afresh, awakened to a new vigor in our relationship with Christ. But all that begins to dissipate when we become mechanical worshippers. And, more than that, Christ becomes distant and far off from us. We no longer walk with him day by day or moment by moment. When you do not do that---since to lose God is to lose yourself---life becomes dull and empty. Tenseness, worry, guilt and loneliness begin to harry your footsteps. Even if you succumb to the need for something to stimulate you. You fall in with the world's futile search for excitement to deaden the pain of an empty life. Is that happening to you?

Well, that is too convicting! Let's move on and look at the second thing that can ruin your life. My second question, what I shall call it. Here is what Paul says of it:

"Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow."

is bring it out and develop your possibilities and full potential. I saw a motto on a wall that said, "What you seek is in your own lantern." That is the idea. You already have it all---now discover it. Numerous groups today offer to help in this: Esalen, Eckankar, est, Transpersonal Psychology, Transactional Analysis and many others. The way, most of these are California groups, I must sadly admit. All of them are designed to help you discover the great potential that is supposedly wrapped up in you. Whitney Houston sings, "To love yourself is to love there is." That is the heart of the human potential quest.

Along with this comes the idea of the "worship of angels," as Paul describes it. That opens up the world of occult manifestations. Those of you who saw Shirley MacLaine's minidrama on television got a glimpse of a world of strange spirit beings, of astrology, ouija boards, tarot cards and assorted holy men, psychics, swamis, yogis and gurus. All of these purport to offer help in increasing our understanding of who we are and what we can do, so as to fulfill the possibilities of our humanity.

What is the danger of that? The apostle puts it very plainly: it "disqualifies you for the prize." He is referring to this "prize" all through this letter. It will eliminate you from the race, removing you from the possibility of experiencing "Christ in you, the hope of glory." That is the great mystery which God has provided us, by which we have immediate and continual access to the fullness of deity in Christ, a source of strength, help and comfort along our way. Such error will effectively remove all opportunity for the experience of love, joy and peace. If you observe Shirley MacLaine and other advocates of the New Age Movement you will discover there is very little evidence that they derive real satisfaction from their experiences. Fascination, yes; satisfaction, no! They are forever seeking. They are never at rest. Their quest for a will-o'-the-wisp, that seems to be further away from them the longer they pursue it, effectively removes one from experiencing the prize that God has in mind for his own: daily fellowship with the loving, living Lord!

I find the phrase "such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen," is a strange translation in the Revised Standard and the New American Standard Versions both agree that this should be translated as "his stand on visions." The New Age Movement makes a great deal of visions, of psychic experiences, of spirit beings, of taking trips outside the body and seeing things that others cannot see, and thus has introduced into strange teachings and ideas. We all remember the claim made by Oral Roberts that he had a nine hundred foot vision of Jesus who told him to build a hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Now Roberts is under attack by the media because of his statement that unless people send him four and a half million dollars by March First, God is going to take his life! This ridiculous claim has turned many people away from the Christian truth. But who are these strange creatures that are seen in these visions? According to the New Age writers they are fallen angels, otherwise known as demons, often masquerading as people who once lived on this earth. Thus, they give some degree of credence to the teaching of reincarnation, which is widespread in the New Age Movement.

With this seeing of visions the apostle links an incredible conceit that claims divine honors for one's self. How he puts it: "his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions." Erich Fromm, whose writings are an early expression of this type of teaching, said, "God is a symbol of man's own powers which he tries to realize in his life." Some of the current New Age writers come right out and say: "We are gods of this universe and we are in complete control of all that happens to us. We are God himself." Perhaps the best answer to such a claim was expressed by G. K. Chesterton earlier in this century when he said to those who made a similar claim:

So you are the Creator and Redeemer of the world? Well, what a small world it must be! What a little heaven you must inhabit, with angels no bigger than butterflies! How sad it must be to be God, and an inadequate God! Is there really no life fuller and no love more marvelous than yours? And is it really in your small and painful pity that all flesh must put its faith in you? How much happier you would be, how much more of you there would be, if the hammer of a higher God could smash your small cosmos, scattering the stars like spangles and leave you in the open, free like other men to look up as well as down!

only one God. 2. You ain't Him!"

In verse 19 Paul tells us what is wrong with this teaching:

"...he has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow."

Someone who becomes involved in this kind of teaching cuts himself off from the Head. When the head is cut off a human body, all life ceases. According to the apostle, the same thing happens when anyone cuts himself off from contact with his Head! He also loses connection with the whole body, which is the church. He is cut off from the Head by teachers and by shepherds (the "ligaments and sinews"), and, therefore, he stops growing completely. Through the years I have observed that people who fall into obsessive or compulsive habits (most of which begin in the teenage years), cease all emotional growth. Compulsive habits such as alcoholism, drug addiction, homosexuality or sexual promiscuity, etc., repeated continually bring an end to emotional maturity. People who become so involved cease to mature and to become responsible people until they cease their compulsive behavior. Then, no matter how old they may be chronologically, they must begin growing emotionally from the level at which they began their habit. That is the terrible danger of this kind of thing. Mysticism, a blind following of spirit guides, atavars, or whatever else they may be called, always arrests growth, the apostle declares. If you want to grow up and mature as a man or woman then follow the process which Paul has outlined in his Word. "Follow me," says Jesus. That is the way to true maturity.

There is still a third danger to faith, which we shall call Asceticism. The apostle brings it before us in this section.

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

Paul is here describing an over-developed zeal, a dedication that goes far beyond true Christian discipline. It seeks to please God by extreme forms of self-denial. Dedication and discipline are a proper part of Christian life. You must often make yourself do what God wants you to do, simply because you love Him. That is the proper motive for it. Paul has already commended the Colossians because they led disciplined and well-ordered lives. But you can make a god of discipline. You can take perverse delight in making your life difficult things that win the approval of others, and (you imagine), of God as well. As a monk, Martin Luther fell into this before he became a believer. He would lie naked in his cell all night long in the bitter cold and beat his body and tortured himself, trying to find peace of heart.

But the apostle says this is all wrong. Lesser forms of it take what he clearly describes here as non-approaches: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" I grew up in Christian evangelical churches where I was taught there were certain things that Christians must always avoid, and if you observed these taboos you were not only acceptable to the religious community but you were actually pleasing God. I was taught that Christians never drink, never dance, never smoke, never go to movies, never play cards, and never read novels. These prohibitions were usually thundered at us! I do not deny that refraining from some of these things is a perfectly proper discipline of the spirit, but any idea that giving up of things of itself is pleasing God, is wrong. Christianity is a positive faith. If you want to know what pleases God, read the last few verses of Romans 12. You will not find anything negative there. Rather, we are asked to "bless those who persecute you," to love the unlovely and minister to the strangers in our midst. Do things that others cannot do; that is how true faith is demonstrated.

But what is wrong with fasting until one is close to death, wearing hair shirts, refusing to marry, eating only vegetables, praying by the clock, etc.? Three things, says the apostle. First, it shows you do not love your death with Christ. "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world [or, as we say, "to the elemental spirits of the universe"], why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit

To do so is to return to childish behavior---thinking that God will be pleased by your negative approach.

In the church this becomes what we call "legalism," which is to pursue holiness by self-effort, instead of accepting the holiness that God freely gives, by faith, and then living it out in terms of experience. The legalist looks at life and says, "Everything is wrong unless you can prove by the Bible that it is right. Therefore, I must have nothing to do with anything that the Bible does not say is right." That reduces life to a narrow range of activity. But the biblical Christian looks at life and says, "Everything is right! God has given us this world to enjoy and live in. Everything is right, unless the Bible specifically says it is wrong." Some things are wrong; they are harmful and dangerous. Adultery is always wrong. So is fornication. Sexual promises are wrong. Lying and stealing are wrong. These things are never right. But there is so much that is left. If we are willing to obey God in the areas that he designates as harmful and dangerous, then we have the right of life to enter into in company with a Savior who loves us, and who guides and guards us in our relationship with him.

Secondly, Paul says that whatever benefit these things may gain it is only temporary, it all ends at death. "These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings." This is why Jesus took the Pharisees to task: "You observe these minute rituals, but inwardly you are torn with dead men's bones." Outwardly you look good, but inwardly you are like a grave full of rotting bones. Your scrupulous refusal to live normal lives gives you certain status and privilege, but it will all prove worthless in the end.

Thirdly, the apostle declares these things are of no value in restraining the indulgence of the flesh. They outwardly appear dedicated and disciplined, but inwardly sin rages unchecked. Inside they are angry, resentful, filled with vituperation and a spirit of vengeance. Many Christians have this problem. They are trying to regulate the externals instead of walking in the fullness and freshness of life with Jesus. They are finding the inward purity and cleansing that he alone provides.

All of these errors have one thing in common---they lose Christ! If you fall into any, you lose the vigor of your Christian walk. Life becomes dull and often desperate. Many Christians discover this too late. What they need to do is to return to Jesus. When these things take over even a little, return to Him. We must take care that every day we are in touch with our loving Lord and in fellowship with Him. He is the One who can develop the self-life, and yet keep us from being captured by the great god, Self. He will restore and comfort us when we fail and falter, and in submission to him we find the freedom we seek.

If you would like some additional insight on the New Age Movement, which is so prevalent in our culture, I would recommend *Unmasking the New Age*, by Douglas Groothuis, a very thorough, well documented book, examining the teachings of the New Age in all its forms. Another book that is helpful (although a bit more alarmist), is David Hunt's *The Seduction of Christianity*.

Catalog No. 4026
Colossians 2:16-23
Eighth Message
January 25, 1987

TRUE HUMAN POTENTIAL

by Ray C. Stedman

In our last study in Colossians we saw the siren song of theological error that was threatening to rob Colossian Christians of all vitality and vigor in their faith. And today, two thousand years later, the same error, under the guise of the New Age Movement, is luring thousands into spiritual slavery by offering them

secret of fulfilled human potential. It is sad to see these ideas being propagated by celebrity evangelists, enticing people into concepts and mysteries that will only leave them disillusioned and enslaved.

But in chapter 3 the apostle Paul once again reveals, in even more precise detail, the true way to live that can be---the true human potential movement. Listen to his opening words:

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

Recently I attended a Men's Retreat at Mount Hermon and enjoyed Tim Hansel's wonderful ministry and encouragement. One thing he said struck me forcibly. He declared the symbol of a Christian life to be a "thumbs up." Not only does that mean "all is well," but it also, according to Hansel, is a reminder to Christians of where our true resource lies. How beautifully it fits this passage! Twice in this short passage the apostle urges us to set our minds and our hearts on "things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." Just as the thumb points upward, so Christians are to look to "things above" for their help.

At first glance it is hard to tell who are the Christians in this world. They are ordinary looking men and women, boys and girls. But according to the Scriptures, and in actual experience, confirmed again and again in many of our lives, being a Christian means we have an extra dimension to life. There is a hidden reality, an invisible reality, which the world does not have and cannot see. This is not referring to Christ being "in heaven," lost in space somewhere! Rather, this refers to what Paul has talked about earlier in this passage: "your life is hid with Christ in God." This extra dimension is not far removed in the reaches of space; it is right in the heart, an untouchable, invisible dimension within us. This is the glory of the Christian life and the source of its power, joy and courage. If you have not discovered this yet as a Christian you have not yet been living as you can and should. This is what puts a smile on a Christian's face, even though he or she is in the world.

"Set your hearts" on this hidden resource, is Paul's exhortation. He means our affections. Think of the affectionate gratitude of what the Lord Jesus has already done for you and what he is to you now. Do not let it become a form of escapism. It is not something you try to keep your mind on all day long, to the exclusion of your family or home. It is rather something that when your mind is occupied with your family, work or whatever, you also bring into it this extra dimension. Christ is part of that situation. That is what Paul means when he says, "your life is hid with Christ in God." Christ is involved with your activities. Remind yourself that whatever you are involved in includes also the person of the Lord himself. His wisdom, power and knowledge are all available to you. That is what Paul means. It ought to awaken our loving gratitude.

But not only our affections, but we are to "set our minds on things above." "Things within" would be a poor translation. Paul is talking about our wills, our choices. Decide to do what you know from your knowledge of the word of the Lord he wants you to do. That is the secret of a life that has discovered how to live. Your life, your daily activity, your thoughts are now tied to Christ. You do wrong if you separate yourself from him. You belong to him. The old godless, self-directed life is over, if you have become a Christian.

Also hope is set before us that when Christ manifests himself again all that we have been learning about his share his life will become visibly manifest. God is moving toward a new age. That is why the New Age Movement is close to the truth, but it is not the truth. There is a new age coming. God is already producing it---it has begun within us---but it is invisible to the world around. One of these days there will be a day when we will be lifted for as Paul puts it beautifully in Romans 8, the whole universe is "standing on tiptoe, craving for the manifestation of the sons of God." That is the goal God is moving toward in this world. We see all the darkness and despair, the trials and hurt all around, but God sees a purpose that is developing and more, moving toward a certain accomplishment that shall be fulfilled when Christ returns.

To sum this all up, Paul is saying that we are to continually remember who we are now, who we were (but no longer are), and who we will be when Christ returns. That is the true basis for living a Christian life. Scripture calls it "walking with the Lord." I like that figure because a walk, of course, merely consists of simple steps, repeated over and over again. It is not a complicated thing. In the same way, the Christian life is a walk.

a matter of taking two steps, one step after another. Then you are beginning to walk. Those two steps are in this passage. Paul describes them as, "Put off the old man," and "put on the new." Then repeat the process. That is all. Keep walking through every day like that. That is how Scripture exhorts us to live. Today we are only at the first of these two steps, what we need to "put off." Next Sunday we shall examine the second step, what we must "put on." Here, then, is what the apostle says we must put off:

"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming, and you used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived."

Everywhere in the New Testament, repeated in various ways, we find this admonition to "put off the old man" and "put on the new man." The first exhortation is always put off. If you are going to put on something, of course, you must first take off what you have got on. If a mother tells her ragged and dirty little boy, "Go upstairs and put on your clean clothes," he knows that the first step is to take off the ragged and dirty clothes. He will get his clean clothes and then he puts clean clothes on over the dirty ones! He must put off the old first. That is also what the Scripture recognizes about us. We have formed habits that are wrong, sometimes without even realizing they are wrong. We have allowed ourselves to take on attitudes and actions that are definitely destructive and are making our life a mess. But once we come to a new life we must "put off the old," so that we can put on the new."

Here in the plainest of language Paul tells us what we must put off: "Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature" (i.e. your old life). Notice that all five of these terms have to do with our sexual proclivities. We are basically sexual beings. God created the human race in two sexes, and he intended it that way. Sex is a tremendously important part of life. It is designed by God to add flavor and excitement to all our relationships. Sex in the Bible is like a great river flowing through life which, kept within its banks, is a source of joy and power. When it overflows its proper banks it becomes destructive and, ultimately, disastrous. Behind the admonition to put off, first, all "sexual immorality." That word refers to all forms of sexual intercourse outside of marriage; what is called "fornication" elsewhere in Scripture; and adultery, which is sexual misbehavior by a married person with someone other than his or her mate. This is to be put off by all Christians. The Word of God is absolutely clear on this. There is no quibbling about these terms. The apostle says exactly what they say: "Put off all sexual immorality."

The second word is "impurity." It is the word for "uncleanness." It refers to what we would call perverted forms of sex---homosexuality, child abuse, and various strange and kinky sexual practices. They are all covered by this one word, "impurity."

Along with these, "lust" is also to be put away. This refers to erotic passions which are aroused (especially in men), by visual things. Pornography clearly falls under this classification. Anything that is sex-

themselves again and again disillusioned and ultimately despairing. Every affair becomes less and less satisfying. They find themselves at last drifting aimlessly, lost on the sea of life.

This has become so common today, as it was in the first century, that even Christians tend to accept these practices and to overlook the error of those who fall into them. The apostle says there are two things that require that acceptance. First, he says,

"Because of these, the wrath of God is coming" ("keeps coming"---continuous present tense).

Several manuscripts add the phrase, "on those who are disobedient." What do you think of when you hear the phrase, "the wrath of God"? Many think of it as a kind of divine temper tantrum; that God gets very angry and vindictively strikes you down in some way or other; lightning bolts shoot from heaven, or whatever. Scripture declares that the "wrath of God" is simply his judicial reaction to evil: it is the way a Holy God reacts to a civilization or individual who turns his back on moral absolutes and tries to ignore moral laws. The chapter of Romans gives a vivid description of what God does in such a case. He removes the restraints on society against evil and lets it have its way, allowing it to produce what evil always produces---destruction in the midst of life. Romans 6 says, "the wages of sin is death." We all suddenly find ourselves facing a new set of practices. The restraints that once kept evil under bonds and within bounds, are lifted, and evil prevails on the scene. Laws are flouted, morality is cast aside, evil is praised and defended on every side. Finally, we reach a stage in society where almost anything goes and we cannot legislate against anything; the moral structure of society is destroyed. It is easy to see that this is right where we are today. Historically, it is always the break-up of government and the overthrow of the forces for law and order within society. The Roman Empire, and many other empires in history, fell apart. These are moral absolutes which men cannot break with impunity. That is what Paul is pointing out. You may think that nothing happens when you allow yourself to fall into immoral practices, but something is happening---God has not lost his power. He is still able to react to evil, and he does react. He allows it to have its head. He removes angelic restraints, and the dissolution of society and nothing man can do can prevent it.

Lewis Smedes, a professor at Fuller Seminary, has put it this way:

Some rules are absolute. They roll like moral thunder through the ages, down the hills of every civilization and into the valleys of every culture. They hold all peoples everywhere to account, all classes, all creeds, rich or poor, ancient or modern. They come with an imperious claim to respect, everywhere, under all circumstances, in every nook and cranny of every individual's private or public existence.

Surely that describes the kind of moral absolutes we are dealing with here. Many people, old and young, often say, "What I do in private is nobody else's business." We hear that on many sides today, even in connection with the discipline of the church: "It is not your business what we do." But it is, because if individuals indulge themselves in this way God takes away the restraints upon evil and all of society is affected.

The second reason Paul gives is stated in verse 7:

"You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived."

If Christians fall into these practices, as they are doing in many ways and in many places today (and we have had manifestations of it right here at PBC as well), they are reverting to a lifestyle which no longer reflects their true identity. They are doing things that are no longer them! In Romans 6:14 we have one of the verses of Scripture, a verse that has meant a great deal to me personally: "Sin shall not be your master, for you are not under law but under grace." Everyone knows that The Ten Commandments legislate, among other things, against adultery and sexual misconduct. "You shall not commit adultery," says the seventh commandment, while the tenth commandment declares, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." The message is very plain and clear.

Now people rightly ask, "What is the difference between this kind of a demand that Paul is making

he says, 'put aside all these things,' and what the law says? Isn't this putting us back under law? There is a big difference. When the law says, "You must not commit adultery," or, "You must not commit adultery with your neighbor's wife," it is saying to humanity in general, "You must stop even though you cannot stop because you will fail, if not outwardly." That is what Jesus refers to in the Sermon on the Mount. The law is not for itself to an already fallen race. Man has, planted in his inner life, a seed of treason and he finds himself disobeying even when he wants to obey. Nobody can obey the law to the degree that God requires. The only function of law is to condemn: it condemns us because we cannot, in actual practice, stop.

But that is not what Paul is saying. What he is actually pointing out in this letter is, "Now that you have become a Christian you are no longer what you once were. Something has happened. You must stop because you can stop." That is what he means in Romans 6:14, "Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law but under grace." You have a new resource, a new power, a new life, a strong Savior who will be with you in every moment of temptation, and you can say, "No!" That is why you must stop. It is the difference between those under law and those under grace.

Going even deeper now, the apostle takes up some of the inner attitudes of our lives.

"But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these..."

If you thought you had come safely through the first list, fasten your seat belts.

"Now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Notice again, we are exhorted to stop doing certain things because we can stop. We are different now, we can act differently. That is the appeal of the grace of God. You have "taken off your old self." Paul has said this earlier in this letter as "being circumcised with Christ." A change has come. You are no longer what you once were. Your life is no longer linked with the old Adam, but with the new Adam, who is Jesus Christ. You have "put on the new self," which is growing and increasing in knowledge. The more you learn of your new life the more you will find you are able to say no to the old. It is increasing in knowledge, growing in the image of Christ its Creator.

So Paul begins the list of attitudes to renounce. First, we no longer need give way to anger. According to Scripture, there is nothing wrong with anger itself. Here, it is an expression of anger that is in violation of the law. A commentator accurately calls "impetuous name-calling or calculated insult." As believers, we must not give in any more. Jesus referred to this in the Sermon on the Mount. "If you call your brother 'Raca,' or 'fool,' you are in danger of the discipline of God." That kind of behavior must go because it belongs to the old life.

The second word is "rage." This refers to temper tantrums, to any violent display or attack, by either party, upon another person. That does not mean we will be removed from the temptation to do these things---the old life still hangs around---but we must remember that it is no longer us. We can say no, because we are new creatures in Christ.

The third word is "malice," that silent, hidden hatred of the heart that takes revenge in secret. Remember the story of the boy who took revenge on his tormentors by spitting in their soup before he served it to them. Have you ever spit in anyone's soup? It is an act of revenge inspired by malice.

Then, fourthly, "slander." That is an attack on another person's character, whispering things about him, whether true or untrue, that destroys his reputation in another's eyes. That is slander. You can be slandered in the world, because even the world recognizes it is wrong.

The fifth word is "filthy language," which is foul talk, crude and coarse words, or expletives which people might resort to in a time of sudden pain or hurt. You all know the temptation to do this, but it is no longer you any more. I find many Christians are confused as to just when they are being

Nobody, of course, wants to be a hypocrite. But many Christians think they are being a hypocrite know that inwardly they have evil temptations but nevertheless they go to church and sing the hymns. What the Bible says, however, is that a Christian is a hypocrite when he gives way to those wrong attitudes. That is when he is no longer being what he really is. You are being your true self when you praise God and respond with love, joy and peace. That is when you are real. You are a phony, a hypocrite, when you give way to evil attitudes and practices.

The sixth word is "lying," untruth that breeds suspicion and destroys trust. Perhaps we all secretly know the little boy who was asked what a lie was and replied, "A lie is an abomination to the Lord, but it does give present help in time of trouble!" But we pay a terrible price for lying by destroying trust and awakening suspicion. We find it hard to win our way back to being trusted again. How vividly that is being demonstrated in the present political climate of our country.

Finally, we have this word in verse 11:

"Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

If you detach that from its context it sounds like a great statement of the Oneness of the body of Christ. Of course, it is. There is a parallel verse to it in Galatians, one that is widely quoted, which includes the distinctions of sex: "neither male nor female in Christ." That is a marvelous expression of the Oneness of the body. But in this particular context, dealing with putting off the expressions of the old life, this verse tells us that we can no longer excuse wrong conduct on the basis of class, background or origin. Have you ever heard a Christian say, "I know I have a temper, but I can't help it. I'm Irish. All Irishmen have hot tempers." That is the kind of thing Paul describes. There is no longer to be any of that for you are no longer what you were. Someone else says, "I'm Italian. That is why I lust. All Italians are hot-blooded." Or, "I'm stingy." Or, "I'm Scotch." Or, "I'm blunt, but our whole family is that way." No, says Paul, we no longer can rely on any kind of excuse for we are no longer what we were born to be. All such background of class, nationalities, training, education, whatever it may be, is all set aside because you are now linked to Christ. "Christ is all"---all believers---and, therefore, we all have what it takes to say no to wrong and (as we will go on next week to see), to say yes to God, so that our lives are filled with love, peace and joy.

We are filled with courage and undaunted confidence that life is not repressive and dull, but an adventure in which we are being led into every situation, trial, hardship, or whatever, to test us and to help us grow. The One who goes with us is able to take us through. We are to "look unto Jesus." That is the example given everywhere in Scripture. He will take us through the present trial and make it into a blessing. "You will be persecuted," he said to his disciples, "shall be turned into joy." That is how a Christian ought to live---joyfully---because of this great truth.

"But you brethren are not in darkness so that the Day of the Lord should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness, so then, let us not be like others who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled, for those who sleep, sleep at night and those who get drunk, get drunk at night, but since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breast-plate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet, for God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

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Colossians 3:1-11
Ninth Message
February 1, 1987

PUT ON THE NEW

by Ray C. Stedman

There was a popular song some years ago, sung by Bing Crosby and others of my generation, that was like this:

You've got to accentuate the positive,
Eliminate the negative,
Latch on to the affirmative,
And don't mess with Mr. In-between.

Those lyrics are an accurate description of the passage we have before us in Colossians, chapter 3, with verse 12. Listen to these affirmative words:

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

There are the positive qualities of Christian living. Through this entire section the apostle has written of putting off and putting on clothes. That suggests that this ought to be done every morning. As chosen people we ought to put on daily these qualities that reflect the character of Jesus. Each of us could be used of him. So when you get up, start out by putting on these qualities of grace.

How do you get up in the morning? Some have great difficulty. Some can leap out of bed, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready to face the day immediately, but others drag along for a couple of hours, needing coffee to get them going. It is reported that Albert Einstein once said, "The problem with the speed of light is that it comes too early in the morning!" I once heard a Southern Baptist preacher in Atlanta confess before a group of pastors, "I don't even believe in God before 10:30 in the morning!" No matter what time you get up, however, Paul's word is, "clothe yourselves." When you get up, deliberately put on these qualities of grace. The reason, of course, is because you can put them on. That is the argument throughout this whole letter. You are a new man, a new woman in Christ, therefore, you can begin to live that way. So do it! That is the apostle's exhortation.

There is much confusion among believers at this point. Many seem to find great difficulty putting on these positive virtues as they begin their day or throughout the day. That is probably because they have not thoroughly understood, or perhaps have not practiced, what the apostle said earlier: "Put off the old man. Learn to recognize the characteristics of the old life: the self-centered, praise-loving, prideful flesh of us. Reject that! Put it off! Do as Paul says in the previous paragraph: "Put to death, therefore, the members of your earthly nature." Treat it as though you are dead to it. That is Paul's argument in Ephesians 4:22. "Consider yourselves to be dead, indeed, unto sin." And you can, because God has given you a new operation!

Listen to Robert Schuller, and other advocates of "positive thinking" or "possibility thinking." What are they saying? Just what this paragraph says, "Put on these positive qualities. Think positively. Face the day with courage and confidence." As we saw in our last study, "thumbs up" is to be the symbol of the Christian. These men make a strong and biblical plea to do this. But the problem with their message, and the problem oftentimes their plea is misleading, is that they fail to make the careful distinction that Scripture makes between the old man and the new man. These positive admonitions are not addressed to the old life. That is the old life that is to be put away. There is a negative quality of living, which precedes the positive. We must reject this appeal because it comes to us so easily from our past experience. It still haunts us as new creations in Christ, because we have not taken over our brain patterns and past programming. We still, all too easily, play over in our minds the old movies of the past. But this is to be put aside. If we do that, then we can respond to these exhortations. What God has now made us to be. So, when you start your day, begin this way. Put away the old man, and then clothe yourself, put on deliberately, in your thinking, these seven qualities that reflect the temperament of Jesus.

The first one is "compassion." "Clothe yourselves with compassion." Literally the word is, "bowels sympathy." The ancients believed that the emotions originated in the bowels. We don't think that although we get close to it when we say, "I've got a gut feeling." I recently heard the story of the was asked to describe the parts of man. She said, "Man has three parts: the brainium, the chester abominable cavity. The brainium holds the brain, the chester holds the heart, and the abominable c the bowels, of which there are five: a, e, i, o and u." Many seem to be as confused about their hu little girl. We must understand what these phrases mean. Compassion is what we would call a "h It is a sense of sympathy, of empathy with someone. When you come to the breakfast table, com compassion: compassion for that strange looking creature, her hair up in curlers, shuffling around in old slippers. Come with compassion for that gruff, stubble-faced fellow, isolated behind his mo newspaper, ignoring everybody; or those children who are trying to get everything together before school. Approach life with compassion; that is what Paul is saying. Put it on when you get up in t You are a new man, or new woman; therefore, live that way!

After that, going a step further, comes "kindness." Kindness is action that reveals compassion, ac arises out of a sense of sympathy. It can take many different forms---a smile, a kind word, a pat shoulder, an invitation to lunch, an offer of help. We are to put on compassion and kindness as w day and throughout the day.

Many centuries ago, a certain young man from a rural setting went to live in a large city and fell in wrong crowd He lived a wild and dissolute life, becoming involved in many hurtful things which al destroyed him But he heard a preacher one day and though he did not particularly appreciate his p was struck by the man He went to hear him again, and soon that preacher was able to lead him t young man has become famous as the great St Augustine. This is what Augustine wrote of Ambro the cathedral in Milan: "I began to love him, not at first as a teacher of the truth, which I despaired the church, but as a fellow creature who was kind to me " What an open door kindness can he!

The third quality is "humility," which John Stott rightly calls "the rarest and fairest of all Christian The chief Christian virtue is humility because it is the exact opposite of the worst of sins, which we are to put on humility, to think humbly of ourselves As the apostle puts it in another place, we "regard others as better than ourselves." We are not to consider ourselves in any way as superior modern proverb puts it well, we are to remember that "all of us are made in the same mold, only s moldier than others!"

The fourth quality is "gentleness," a familiar word that is oftentimes translated "meekness." Not v meekness! I like the definition that says meekness is "strength under control." It is real strength, have to display itself or show off how strong it is. This is what our Lord beautifully displayed He himself as "meek and lowly in heart." The first curriculum of the Holy Spirit is that we must do wh said, "take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart." That is what we learn as we go on Here is another excellent definition of meekness: "a willingness to waive one's r good cause." Set aside your rights! Do not demand that you be satisfied, but, for the sake of a go willing to suffer loss. Meekness is the exact opposite of rudeness and abrasiveness.

The fifth quality is "patience. Literally, it is longsuffering, the enduring of another's exasperating c without flying into a rage. It is a negative term. It is holding back, restraining yourself from becom speaking sharply or shrilly to somebody by our mate, your child, whoever whose conduct you find and exasperating.

Linked with patience is the sixth quality, "forbearance." "Bear with one another." This is similar to longsuffering, but it is the positive side. Literally it is "to uphold and support" someone. Not only yourself but to support others, encourage them. It is a great Christian quality.

The last quality (which I feel the apostle deliberately put last) is "forgiving one another"---"Forgive grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." What a beautiful find forgiveness in a Christian's heart! It does not mean that we are not to air a grievance we ma told in Scripture that if we have something against another to "go to the other and tell him his or

between you and him alone." We do not have to repress every feeling of injustice or unfairness that we feel. We are to say how we feel, but, having done that---this is the point---having gotten it out, forgive it. Put it away. No longer let yourself think about it. Our model, of course, is Christ's treatment of us. What he did when we came to him. He forgave the unkind thoughts, the blasphemous attitudes, the hurtful sins that we have done. The Old Testament tells us that when we come to him he "casts our transgressions into the depths of the sea." And, as dear Corrie Ten Boom used to say, he puts up a sign that says, "No Fishing."

It is helpful to remember that forgiveness means at least three things. First, it means that we are to go to the person whom we have forgiven the thing we forgave. We are to treat him as though it did not happen. We are not to constantly harass him or her with reminders of the evil things they did in the past. Many marriages stumble greatly at this point because the partners not only get hysterical, they get hysterical back over the past, ready to trot it out and rehash it once more. That shows that it has never truly been forgiven in the first place. God does not do that. How terrible it would be if he did---if we had constantly been reminded from him of the awful things of our past!

The second thing forgiveness means is that we do not tell anybody else about the matter that is forgiven. We do not gossip about it to others. It is not that we actually erase it from memory---we may think of it as if it were time---but we are not to dwell on it. We are not to allow it to take over again, to awaken feelings of resentment and unfairness and play it all over again. We can do that because we ourselves have been forgiven. Let us remember how graciously God has set aside our own failures.

Then the third thing forgiveness means is: you do not remind yourself of what has been forgiven! You do not let your private thoughts you never allow the offense to come up and to color your attitude toward the one who has forgiven. If it does come up, you must put it away and remind yourself that you too need to be forgiven. You do not want people mulling over your sins and dredging them up all the time. No, forgiveness means that you set it aside even to yourself because that is what Christ has done for us.

Then, having given us these seven beautiful qualities, the apostle tells us to wrap it all around with love: "over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Someone has put it this way: "Put on the overcoat of love." Love ties everything together like a belt or a girdle. This, of course, is that quality of acceptance of others because you are a new person yourself. You are no longer the person you once were. You have put that aside already. Treat the past as though you were dead to it, and God has made you to be.

Do not miss the basis for all of this, given in verse 12: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved." There it is. That is something God did for us. We did not make ourselves holy. We did not enter ourselves into the kingdom of God. Jesus said once to his disciples, "You have not chosen me but I have chosen you and appointed you that you should bear much fruit." Though we needed to make a decision for Christ, we soon came to understand that we would never have made that decision had we not been drawn to him. We are chosen of him. It is his choice of us that enabled us to choose him.

It is important to note also that when the apostle calls Christians "God's chosen people" (or, as it is also called, "God's elect"), he does not mean that the church has replaced Israel. Israel is also "God's chosen people" on a different level and for a different purpose. The promises to Israel are material: they deal with the kingdom on the earth. We believe that the dreams of the prophets, so beautifully expressed by Isaiah, Hosea and others, will be fulfilled in a coming day, which Paul describes in chapter 11 of Romans. Israel has a future for his earthly people. They are still his chosen people. But the church is chosen for a different purpose. Our promises are spiritual. We are "blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ." The church, therefore, has to do with heaven, not earth. We deal with the invisible realms and not the visible kingdoms around.

So, to clarify, this phrase does not mean that the church has become the "new Israel." That term is not used in Scripture. It is an unbiblical concept. But we are chosen, and we are "holy." Here is a word that is separate and distinct. We are intended to be different. Christians are to live differently than the world lives. We do not run after the crowd and follow its fashions and value systems. We are expected

because we are different. We share a different kind of life.

Then the third phrase is, "dearly loved by God"---dear to the heart of God. There is no more powerful motivating force in our lives than to remember that we are loved by God. He loves us deeply. Why? God love us the way he does? To be such people as we are and still be loved by him is one of the wonders of all time. We are never to forget this. It is our basis for action.

That thou shouldst so delight in me
and be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect,
But sunshine to my heart.

Next, the apostle moves beyond our lives as individuals, to the church, and how the body ought to function.

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called into the world. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and counsel one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

What a beautiful picture that is of the functioning of the church! What should it be like when we are gathered in a meeting like this or when we are together away from this building? Church life is to be characterized by three P's: peace, praise, and precepts. Or, if you prefer, three T's: tranquility, thanksgiving, and teaching. As the apostle points out, it begins with peace: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." We were called into the world. Churches are to live at peace.

The word "rule" here is interesting. It is the word for "act as an umpire." Baseball fans know that the black suit who stands behind the catcher rules on the plays and makes the calls. He remains unruffled no matter what happens. Managers curse him and kick dirt at him, fans throw pop bottles, but he remains unperturbed. That is the idea here: let the calmness of Christ rule among you. Consider the parable of the man with the fig tree in the gospels. He moves into every situation with total poise. He is not upset by others but remains calm and collected when other people are panicking around him. He is in control. That is to characterize the church's functioning.

I was in another city recently, meeting with Christians who were divided into two factions. What was being discussed were questions of turf, of who had the right to do such and such a thing. The spokesman for one group was rather difficult. He was loud, accusatory and abrasive. The spokesman for the other party, however, remained calm and peaceful and did not react in kind. Thus, before long things began to work out and the meeting ended in harmony. Everybody understood one another. That is what Paul is urging: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your midst," because that is what we are called to do. His serenity should rule in our hearts and "act as an umpire" among us.

The second thing is to be thankful. We find this exhortation everywhere in Scripture. Christians are characterized by an attitude of gratitude about everything. Why? Because we know that we do not deserve anything. Everything comes to us as a gift of God's love. We learn from the Scriptures that we are a fallen race. At birth we began to manifest rebellion, treason and enmity against the things of God. We are self-centered, and opposed to others. We have all manifested that right from birth. God, in perfect justice, could have wiped out this entire race and none of us would have hope for anything in this life or the next. But God gave it to us anyway, "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." What a gift! And everything else comes with it: "He spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Does that not awaken gratitude in your heart? Christians are to have a sense of gratefulness about every crust of bread or a glass of water because it is all undeserved. So be thankful, says the apostle. Let thankfulness characterize your meetings. Let there be an attitude of gratitude!

Then the third thing: instruct one another by means of the word. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." The Word is to be well known among us. It is to be the central thing in teaching us how to live.

amazing Book, this insight into true life, is unrivaled anywhere in the world. There is nothing else that remotely approaches it in its view of reality.

Notice, too, how the whole body is to be involved in this. We are to "teach and counsel one another"---everybody---in homes, in church, in classes, in Bible study groups, in breakfast groups---should glorify the Word. We ought to thoroughly know and understand this book. Here are described marvelous truths which challenge the greatest minds among us. Here are simple statements that burst like rockets and illuminate the whole landscape of life. Jesus said, "He that follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life." This is not dead, lifeless truth! It is alive, vital, refreshing and illuminating! It conquers our doubts, fears and difficulties. We are to center our lives around the Word of God.

With this Paul links also the ministry of music. I have always enjoyed Hawaiian songs and music ever since I lived in Hawaii many years ago. Once when I commented on the beauty of their music, one of the Hawaiians said to me, "You know, the Hawaiians never had any music until the missionaries came. The Hawaiians do is chant. They do not know how or what to sing." The first songs the Hawaiians ever sang were the hymns taught them by missionaries. Then they began to adapt them to other themes and we ended up with "Blue Hawaii," "Sweet Leilani," "The Little Grass Shack," etc. It is Christian truth that inspires the great music. Music belongs to the believer.

Here the apostle recognizes its powerful ministry in our lives. We are to "sing psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs." Psalms, of course, are the inspired utterances of the Book of Psalms and found also in various other books of the Bible. How marvelous is this teaching from God, put in rhythm and beauty of expression. "Hymns" are literally praise songs, responses that humans have composed to reflect with thanksgiving to God for what He has done. With this is linked "spiritual songs," testimony songs which reflect, again, how God has worked in our lives. If you look through any hymn book you will find these three types of songs included. We sing of God's love in praise songs earlier, "Joyful, Joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love." Some of the great hymns, such as "And can it Be?" remind us of the wonderful love of Christ that sacrificed himself for us. There is a whole compendium of theology in that great hymn, and others like it.

As we sing we are ministering to each other, encouraging one another. You may have come to church feeling depressed and discouraged, but as the congregation lifted up one of these great hymns you were encouraged and well. You began to rejoice again in spirit because the music and the words reminded you of the great love of God. So we are to sing the truth as well as study it, with gratitude in our hearts for all that God has done for us.

Verse 17 moves to the arena of society and the world.

"Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

I hope you will memorize this marvelous verse and repeat it to yourself frequently. "Whatever you do" means the whole of life is to be related to the Lordship of Jesus. Everything in life, every activity of ours, should be an act of worship. Even routine things can be offered to Christ; done "in the name of the Lord," making every act of worshiping "Whatever you do" in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

exhortation to us: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee,
Praising Thee their sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!

All Thy works with joy surround Thee,
Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee,
Center of unbroken praise;
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Blooming meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain,
Call us to rejoice in Thee.

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Colossians 3:12-17
Tenth Message
February 8, 1987

LIVING CHRISTIANLY

by Ray C. Stedman

How to live Christianly is one of the great problems we face as believers. It is helpful to remember that the secret of Christian living can be put in one sentence. Paul actually does that in his letter to the Galatians: "Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh."

The root cause of the shame, weakness and violence of the world is that men and women are living in the flesh, and desires of the flesh, fulfilling the urges that arise from within. But men and women are given grace to live on when they come to Christ. The glory of the gospel is that we have been given a new life. We do not have to live the way the world lives any more. We can, in Paul's words, "put off the old and put on the new." That is what he stresses in all his letters, and notably so in this Colossian letter. A walk in the Spirit is what he calls it. It is two steps repeated over and over, consisting of these two actions, "putting off the old and putting on the new."

In the section of the letter before us, beginning with verse 18 of chapter 3, Paul moves to the actual experiences we face day by day. This is where "the rubber meets the road," as the saying goes---the sweat and tears of living. Here he deals with our relationships, highlighting and examining what to do and what to put on. Naturally, he begins at the very heart of all life, the family. Here is his word addressed to wives:

"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."

This word "submit" has become the focus of the feminist movement and is probably the most hated

among women today. The meaning has been grossly distorted. Many wrongs things have been done in the name of submission. Perhaps the first thing that needs to be said about submission is that it does not mean inequality. Although it is addressed here to wives, it is not a female word in the Bible but is addressed to men as well. Thus it is not a sexist word.

Everyone must submit to other people. In Ephesians, Paul says Christians are to submit "one to another as the Lord has submitted himself to the Father." The outstanding manifestation of true submission, of course, is seen in our Lord's submitting of himself to the Father. No one would ever conceive of the idea that Jesus found it a reproach to submit to the Father. He was delighted in it. It was voluntary on his part. In no way did he regard it as a threat to the equality that existed between himself and the Father. Therefore, to submit to someone does not mean you are inferior. This is the confusing meaning which the world has poured into this word. Submission does not mean inequality. Literally, it means "put yourself under, arrange yourself under someone, for a good and noble purpose." It is a totally voluntary action.

In Australia a number of years ago, Ron Ritchie and I were ministering as part of a team in the city of Brisbane. As we were going to a meeting one evening we stopped on a street corner to talk, and Ron had his arm around a pole holding a street sign. We were talking about something that the team wanted to do but which he did not want to do, and he was sounding off about his feelings on the matter. As he looked up and read the sign which was over his head and immediately broke into laughter. Then he looked at me and started laughing too. What the sign said was, "Give Way," which is the Australian way of saying "Yield." In his dramatic way, Ron immediately cried, "A message from the Lord!" (which it really was) and he submitted himself at once, and the problem disappeared.

That thought is what Paul has in mind when he says that wives' submitting to their husbands is proper; it is right. There is an order of authority in all God's world. The Father observes it. The Son observes it. Everything in nature observes it. There is a time to "Give Way"; to give in and support another. The quality of this word is that it stresses the need to support. This podium in front of me is useful in that the top section on top supports hymn books, etc. But notice that the useful part is supported and held up by the section underneath. Without that support the rest of the stand, including the useful portion of it, would fall. If the wife does not support and hold up her husband, honor him, and thus recognize his leadership, there is chaos in the home. One of the reasons we are having so many problems in society today is that the concept of support has been distorted and set aside. So the apostle's word to a wife is, submit yourself to your husband! Follow him, not in things that are wrong according to your conscience---we are not even to do that with regard to the state---but in everything that is right show yourselves to be behind your husband. Submit to him, support him in his role of leadership in the family.

I would also add this word. This is addressed to wives. It is not the husband's responsibility to make a wife submit! After the first service this morning a man said to me, "I opened my Bible the other day and the first thing I saw was this verse, 'Wives, submit to your husbands.'" I said to him, "But that is not addressed to you. That is something Paul tells your wife to do. It is the next verse that God addresses to you." If there is no voluntary submission on her part the word is useless. Submission cannot be demanded. The Father does not demand it of the Son. It is a voluntary submission which wives are exhorted to make because it is proper; it is right in the sight of God.

Paul follows with a word to husbands.

"Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them."

Here again we learn what to put on and what to put off. Put on love! Husbands are to work at this. The husband's role in marriage is contained in Paul's words, "Love your wife." He must give himself to her. Note it does not say, "Make love!" Although sex plays a very important role in marriage, and proper sex is not the key to marriage. But love is. The word is agapao. That is God's word for love. Honor, value, respect, guard, protect, show delight in your wife. This is something a husband is to plan for and work at all year long. Not just on Valentine's Day or on wedding anniversaries, but all through the year as well.

The thing to put off is "harshness." It belongs to the old nature. Husbands are not to be caustic,

resentful or sarcastic toward their wives. These things are especially hurtful to women. Lord Byron said, "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart; 'tis woman's whole existence." Women are made differently than men. You can be sharp with a man friend and he will shrug it off and not become upset by it. But that with your wife you will cut her deeply, far more than you may realize. So, put off these traits of anger and sarcasm. They are from the old life. As Christian husbands you do not have to act that way. When a husband says something sharp to his wife it is very difficult for her to give him the support which he asks of her. I heard of a man who once said to his wife, "You're nothing but a rag, a bone, and a hair!" Her response was, "You're nothing but a brag, a groan, and a tank of air!" She was cut by his words and responded in kind.

fathers do not obey the word of the apostle, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will be discouraged."

A lengthier section, beginning in verse 22, follows, addressed to slaves and their masters. Representatives of each must also have been present during these early church services. It was probably the only place where slaves and masters got together on the same level, without racial or class distinctions. Paul first addressed the word to slaves.

"Slaves, obey your masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and you hope to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord."

These are words to Christian slaves. At this time, one half of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were slaves to the other half. Most households had several slaves, thus they formed an important part of the economy of the empire. People often ask, why do not the Scriptures directly address the problem of slavery? Why were masters instructed to free their slaves? The answer is that conditions were not at all ripe for that. Attempts to foment revolt among the slaves had already occurred in Roman history. The slave, Spartacus, had already led a revolt that was crushed with an iron fist, resulting in even worse conditions for slaves.

It is important to understand that it is not merely a reaction of Christians to those in control that led to freedom. There must first be a change of atmosphere that will allow for this. That is why this word was given to slaves to personally control themselves and obey their masters. Not, as many were tempted to do, outwardly, with a heart of resentment, but with genuine service, as unto the Lord. Years ago, a man from Africa told me that he was responsible for getting the nationals in his area to do certain jobs. He found that they were all rather lazy and would only perform while he was actually watching them. When he left they would stop work and do nothing until he returned. This man had a glass eye, and one day when he was irritating him he took it out and put it on a stump. When he returned he found that everybody was working because the "eye," as they thought, was watching them all the while he was away. That is what this means here: eye-service! Working only when the boss is watching. This man thought he had found a way to free himself, until one day he returned to discover that one of the workers had sneaked a hat behind and put his hat over the eye, and everyone was lounging around, enjoying themselves. That is eye-service!

We need to apply these words of the apostle in the realm of our work today. When you commit your work for somebody you are, in a sense, selling yourself as a slave for the hours involved. Employers do not control the rest of your life, but they do have a right to control your life during your working hours. These words therefore have direct reference to us. We are not to work only while the boss is watching. As the apostle says, whatever we do, we are to work at it "with all our heart, as working for the Lord, not for man, knowing that we will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism."

His appeal, of course, is very clear. We are to work "as unto the Lord." That is to be our motivation for the Lord Christ we are serving. Every employee ought to write that down and put it somewhere where they can see it during working hours. "It is the Lord Christ I am serving." Do not ever work for anyone else, as if you are working only for the Lord. Your employer may pay your salary, but it is the Lord for whom you are working. If you do that both the quality and the quantity of your work will improve, because you are working with gratitude and love to the Lord. Love, of course, is the greatest driving force in life. What a change it will make in your job!

But, more than that, as the apostle suggests, there is a reward, or a lack of reward, involved. He is making reference to what the Scriptures call "the judgment seat of Christ," the great time of approval. Every believer will stand before the Lord who will give his judgment as to what he has been doing. The things that you and I have been doing will pass before our eyes and we will know whether it has been done "for the glory of the Lord" or for our own glory. There will be reward for that which is done from a proper motive of thanksgiving and glory to God. Some may ask, "What is the reward?" It is not material---beautiful things or gold medals. The reward of faithful service is always opportunity for greater service. The reward is to be allowed to demonstrate your love in still greater service. That is why Jesus said that he that is faithful

rule over ten cities, while another one, who is less faithful, is given rule over five cities. Thus, opportunity for service is the reward. It is what our hearts will desire more than anything else in that day.

On the other hand, Paul says, "there is no favoritism." If you do a sloppy job at work, you will lose opportunity for service and you will be given a less valuable or satisfying realm of labor in the eternities. This is being settled now. That is why Jesus could say, "He that is faithful in little shall be given a much more." We ought to keep this clearly in mind as we go about our work.

On the other side are the apostle's words to masters.

"Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair because you know that you also have a master in heaven."

Employers, be concerned about how generously and justly you treat your workers! Again, it is all in light of the Great Appraisal which is yet to come, when hearts will be revealed. Here is revealed concern for justice and fairness. One of the commentators suggests that perhaps in those days of the apostles masters were being gently exhorted here to provide means by which slaves could build up a fund whereby they could eventually buy their freedom. Thus, in time, conditions and attitudes toward slaves would change and the practice would disappear from the empire. That, in fact, is what eventually happened. Without a violent overthrow, without revolution of any kind, the preaching and teaching of equality changed the atmosphere of the Roman Empire and slaves at last were set free.

Finally, there comes a paragraph of general counsel on Christian response to daily circumstances. How should we live today, in a world given over to false values, with much conflict, shame, and degrading practices? Should we then live? Here are Paul's words:

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God will may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should."

Prayer ought to be a central practice of our lives. Notice how the apostle puts it: "watch and pray" to remind the words of Jesus to Peter, James, and John in the Garden of Gethsemane. He said to them, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation." They did not obey him but fell asleep, unaware of the danger they were in. Consequently, Peter denied his Lord, and James and John fled in the darkness, like all the disciples who abandoned the Lord.

This word underscores the awareness that we live in a dangerous world. We are under subtle attack all the time, and we ought to be aware of what that is doing to our lives---how it robs us of our joy, takes our peace, or restricts our love, changing us and making us dull and shallow in our reactions. When you feel something lessening spiritual vigor in your life, pray that God will restore it. And not only pray for yourself but, as Paul suggests here, pray for others too, for open doors for those who are ministering. Paul was in prison, limited, in chains, and he is asking that God will set him free to proclaim this magnificent mystery: "the mystery of Christ." Earlier in this letter we learned what that is: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." It is the central message of the Christian faith. It is a new way to live: Jesus Christ in you. By his grace and strength you can be what you ought to be! That is what Paul wants freedom to declare. Christianity is a revolutionary, even a dangerous movement. The church is a dangerous body of people. Turned loose in a world the church will challenge many things that are going on around us. And it ought to do so. We are often ourselves in trouble at times. That is why we need to "watch and pray."

Yet further, we need to be sensitive, to be wise in the way we act toward outsiders. "Make the most of every opportunity." That is the sensitive thing to do. Listen to the way you talk. What do non-Christians think of the way you act? Dr. Richard Halverson, the Senate Chaplain, told me once of a home Bible study he attended where both Christians and non-Christians were present. One man opened the class in prayer. While he was praying, Dick, like many of us at times do, was saying a quiet "Amen, amen," to what was being prayed. The next morning the man said to him, "I was very grateful to have you at the class last night. When I was praying I kept hearing you say, 'Amen.' Have you considered what the non-Christians

thought of that? They are not used to that kind of thing. They must have thought you were a fan probably felt uncomfortable." Dick Halverson had the grace to say, "I appreciate that man. I'm glad that out to me." In the early days when we had a number of large evangelistic home Bible studies problems we faced was from Christians, reflecting a self-righteous attitude, who raised questions others feel uncomfortable. That is terribly wrong. Here Paul reminds us to be sensitive and wise in act, but to make the most of every opportunity. Because the days are evil, opportunities for witness on every side.

The final word is, be gracious!

"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

Graciousness means to be pleasant and courteous, to be easy to live with. What we have to say to people mad, finally, but the way we say it is very important. Here the apostle takes note of this. It is not pungent, obscene phrases thrown into the conversation.

Today we say someone is "salty" because he uses profane language, but that is not what is meant. It means conversation that is flavored with attractive ideas so that listeners are stimulated, their curiosity

I have always appreciated what Ron Ritchie does when he meets people on planes. It has been my experience and Ron's too, that when I am asked what I do for a living and I reply, "I'm a preacher," a curtain is drawn immediately; the conversation is ended. But Ron has found a way to get around this. When he is asked what he does for a living, he replies, "I'm a teacher." Then when he is asked what he teaches, he says, "I teach people about Jesus if they want to listen." That puts the onus back on the questioner: "Do you want to listen, don't you? If you don't want to, that's fine with me. But if you want to listen, I want to tell you about someone who is very important to me." That has opened many doors for him. That is graceful conversation, talk that is "seasoned with salt." It is pungent and stimulating, and follows the suggestion of the apostle on how to live in a confused world.

So let us apply all this to our own lives. Let us begin at home, and from there move out into all the world, off the old ways and putting on our new life, with Jesus in our hearts, living gracious, sensitive, and wise in our lives!

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February 15, 1987

THE EARLY-DAY SAINTS

by Ray C. Stedman

In our final study in the letter to the Colossians we come to a list of names of associates and friends of the apostle Paul. We could call these people "the early-day saints." Down the street from this church is another church building, called "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." Mormons believe that Scripture has been so garbled in translation through the centuries that it has lost all authenticity, and they had to begin again with a new revelation which they call the Book of Mormon. Thus, they think of themselves as the Latter-Day Saints. But the glory of the Bible is that in it we have an unbroken and trustworthy record of the early-day saints! In this section we will recognize these saints to be the same kind of people as we are today. They have the same Lord, and believe the same dramatic, dynamic truths that we believe. This is a very relevant passage for us.

The letter closes much in the same way as we end letters today, with greetings to and from friends and associates. But there are also certain themes which shine through these references to individuals which will reveal characteristics of life in the early church and what they thought to be important. The first of these is that of the importance of discipleship. In verses 7-9, mention is made of two of the disciples who traveled along with him in a training experience.

"Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here."

We should be grateful for these two men mentioned because they brought this letter from Paul to the church in Colossae. They may not have realized what a treasure they were carrying, or how momentous the letter would prove to be but how grateful we are for their faithful obedience.

Tychicus was one of a band of young men and women who accompanied Paul on much of his ministry. There were no seminaries in those days, so training was done in the most effective way of all---through on-the-job, personal relationships. This involved taking people along on journeys and teaching them what was important and how to respond to situations. Four years in a seminary today could not possibly equal two years of this intense, personalized training with the apostle Paul himself. Tychicus, who was from Thessalonica, traveled widely with Paul. He was part of the delegation chosen by the churches of Asia to accompany the apostle when he took to Jerusalem the special offering that had been collected from the poor and needy saints there. Later, Paul sent him to Ephesus to take Timothy's place in that city, and as the letter to Titus suggests, Tychicus was sent to Crete.

Notice the three descriptions used by Paul which give insight into how he related to these young men and women who accompanied him on his ministries. He calls Tychicus "a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant." In the first description, "a dear brother," we see something of the ties of love that bound the apostle to these young men, and bound them to him as well. You cannot read the New Testament without seeing in these affectionate greetings that Paul was a very warmhearted man. He loved those who followed him and showered them with praise and encouragement.

He also calls Tychicus a "faithful minister." Here Paul assesses the quality of his work. The chief quality of a Christian at work is faithfulness. In the letter to the Corinthians, the apostle writes that God has chosen us as stewards of the mysteries of Christ. He goes on to say, "It is required of stewards that they be faithful." That is what God values more than anything else. He does not ask us to be popular, or brilliant, or successful, or accepted, but he does ask us to be faithful in whatever ministry, task, or assignment he has given us. Faithfulness is what will win high praise at the throne of grace. Tychicus had amply demonstrated his faithfulness.

The third phrase, which describes Tychicus as a fellow servant, speaks not of the quality of his work but of the equality of the workers. The departure of the church from the first century relationship of brotherhood with another has always puzzled me. There is no hierarchy in the early church. That has been imposed on the church and borrowed directly from the world. Paul never refers to himself as a pope, or even as a bishop. He always speaks of himself as a fellow worker, a fellow servant. He is an apostle (authorized spokesman), an older brother, and sometimes calls himself a spiritual father, yet his authority was one of love and respect, not knowledge. To paraphrase a modern television advertisement, he "gained his authority the old-fashioned way---he earned it." He gained it by loving these younger men and women and by treating them with courtesy and respect as equals. He shared with them the vast knowledge of truth he had, yet always on a basis of equality. As a result he gained their respect and their voluntary submission to his desires. Perhaps the most striking phrase uttered by Jesus is given in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, where he said to his disciples, "One is your Master; all you are brothers." There never was intended to be a hierarchy in the church. When we impose one upon it we greatly disturb the proper functioning of the body of Christ.

The story of Onesimus is related in the letter to Philemon. Onesimus was a runaway slave. He appeared with some of his master's money with him when he left. Somehow he found his way to Rome and came with Paul. The apostle himself probably led him to Christ. Paul now sends him back to his master, with a beautiful appeal to Philemon, "If he has done anything wrong, charge it to my account!" He asked Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a brother in Christ and restore him to his household. It is likely that Onesimus was sent back to Colossae to be a minister among the slaves who probably made up half the congregation in the early day churches. By this means the gospel penetrated all classes of society. Jesus himself said that as living Lord was to place people where he wanted them to be. "You have not chosen me," he said.

and Demas.

"Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings."

We have already met Epaphras in the opening verses of this church. He was the evangelist who first came to the church at Colossae. He had probably carried the gospel to these three cities, Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis, when Paul was living in Ephesus, teaching the word of God five hours each day, six days a week for three years. What a tremendous outpouring of Christian truth that must have been! Epaphras was a pastor's heart. He labored in teaching and in prayer to bring these Colossian Christians to maturity. We don't know how he got to Rome. He may have gone there to get apostolic instruction on how to deal with that terribly subtle and powerful false teaching that had surfaced in Colossae (of which we see a court case in the New Age movement today).

It is interesting to remember that in the letter to Philemon, Epaphras is called a "fellow prisoner" of Paul. That may indicate that he too was arrested by the Romans when he came to visit Paul and was confined with Paul as the apostle. This would explain why he was unable to return to Colossae. In his absence he "agonized" (that is the word Paul uses) in prayer for the Colossian saints, praying that they "may stand firm in the will of God, be mature and fully assured." What a lesson that is concerning prayer! How many times do we pray with agony like this? Oftentimes we are more interested in what we can get from God. I am reminded of a Digest article I read the other day about a military commander who was giving instructions to a group of recruits. "I am your commanding officer," he told them, "and when I give you an order I expect you to obey it instantly. But aside from that, I want you to think of me as a father and come and talk to me about your problems." Immediately a hand went up and a voice said, "Hey pop, how about borrowing the jeep?" God is our Father, and many of us think of prayer as a way we can get things from him. Oftentimes our prayers reflect that shallow concept. But Epaphras interceded with agony and perseverance on behalf of the Colossians.

You too may be separated from loved ones who need spiritual help. What can you do? You can pray. Prayer is a marvelous provision to release spiritual power into an individual's life, to remove obstacles, to open doors. It may take a long time, so prayer must be persevering. My wife and I recently have had our eyes seeing God open doors for someone close to us for whom we have been praying for many years. The man is beginning to melt and respond as God answers prayer for him.

With Epaphras is linked the most faithful of all of Paul's associates, Doctor Luke. In Second Timothy, Paul's apostle's last letter, Paul writes, "Only Luke is with me." All the others had left, but Luke remained to the end. To this beloved, faithful brother we owe both the gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Christ will reveal the enormous debt the church owes to Luke for his faithful labors to the end.

Some versions say, "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nymphas and the church in his house." It is difficult to know whether this refers to a woman or a man for some versions have the ending, while others have the feminine. It is likely, however, that this person was a woman who owned her own home. Perhaps she was a businesswoman, or a wealthy widow. In Philippi, Paul and Silas stayed in the home of Lydia, a "seller of purple." Many of you old timers here remember our "purple lady," Alma, a wealthy widow who bought the pews on which you are sitting. This church has been greatly blessed by her generosity. The early church was similarly blessed with businesswomen and wealthy widows.

We do not find any church buildings described until the third century, so that for at least 250 years Christians met in homes, and when they met they read the Scriptures. That is what Paul exhorts them to do in his letters. Letters were already widely shared, as we see from this note. He himself makes the claim in I Thessalonians (one of his earliest letters) that what he preached was not his own ideas but it was "the word of God" that came to them. Thus they read and studied these letters; analyzed and applied them. This reading of letters was a part of their worship service, just as it does in our churches today. You can imagine how this letter to the Colossians was discussed in the church at Colossae, amidst the heresy and false teaching that was

condoms may be well intentioned, it conveys a false sense of sexuality. She was able to contrast

before we begin listing our own needs.
Give us grace to live in such a way
that we draw attention to You. Amen.

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