

December 14

Colossians & Philemon

Today you read Colossians and Philemon. As we read these epistles today, there is so much packed into them. Time limits me to chat on just a few observations and topics. The most striking thing about the passage that we read today is the Christological teaching, that is, the truth that it gives us about the Person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The teaching about Christ comes against the backdrop of Paul's concern that the Colossian Christians not be taken in by the false teaching that had sprung up in their midst.

The heretics referred to in Colossians insisted upon an ascetic way of life. "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch" seems to be their slogan. They were separating themselves from particular kinds of food and drink and were also very rigorous about certain feast and fasting days. Perhaps they were carrying on with some of the Pharisaic rules and elevating their legalistic "keep the rules" mentality to the forefront of their practice of Christianity.

Paul then points out, that 'Jesus Christ was a pre-existent Being. That is, He existed from eternity past with the Father. More than that, Paul tells us that Christ is the agent of creation -- "By him all things were created...all things were created by Him and for Him." To that end He is the Head of the Church, the entire "fullness" of God. Paul uses it here to emphasize that Jesus Christ is truly God, just as much as He is truly man! Because of this passage, and others like it, we believe that Jesus Christ was one Person -- with two natures. He was fully man - so He had a human nature just like you and me, and He was also fully God - so He had a divine nature.

Now, there is one phrase in Colossians 1:15 that is often misunderstood. In fact, cults have seized upon it to teach that Jesus Christ is not God. It is found at the beginning of the section in verse 15, when Paul says that Christ is the "first born over all creation." The cults then teach, "If Christ is the first born then He must have had a beginning - He was created - He is therefore not eternal and therefore He is not God. If He is not God we shouldn't worship Him!" He is the exact image of the invisible God -- that is saying, 'Christ is identical with God -- Christ equals God!!' "He is before all things and in him all things hold together." How could He be before all things if He Himself was a created being? Then in chapter 2 we read, "In Christ all the fullness of God lives in bodily form." Add to that all the other New Testament passages, like the one in John 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

When you interpret Scripture in light of its immediate context, and in the light of other Scripture, you can easily see that this expression is not meant to teach that Jesus Christ is not God or is somehow a created being. What we are looking at is a Greek idiom -- "the firstborn," which means "preeminent" or "prior to" in terms of rank or importance. "Prototokos," the Greek word here, means He is "before" all creation.

Paul typically writes about doctrine and truth, and then he gives the last portion of his letters to applications of the truth he has given to the realities of everyday living. Colossians is exactly the same as his other letters -- first doctrine, then application. Today

in chapters 3-4 we learn what a Christian looks like who truly understands the supremacy of Christ!!

Colossian passage says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." Now what does that tell us? Colossians 3.16 tells us is to "let the word of Christ dwell in us richly," If you want to experience the fullness of Christ in every area of your life, you need to know the Word, you need to meditate on the Word, and you need to obey the Word. The Christian life is all about recognizing Christ as supreme in our theology, and then making Him supreme in our life; and the first step to knowing Christ better is knowing and obeying His word.

Well, are there other keys to making Christ supreme in our lives that we find here in Colossians 3 and 4? The whole section begins with the injunction to "set our minds on things above, not on earthly things." It's a matter of focus. If you wake up every morning and focus on how much money you're going to make today, it is entirely possible that you'll make a lot of it -- you're focused. By the same token, if the first thing you think about is Christ -- you set your focus on Christ and on things above, there is a pretty good chance your life will begin to reflect that focus.

Did you notice the 'putting off and a putting on.' We have to put off (by putting to death) all the things that belong to our earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying -- that's quite a list, and you know we could add a lot of other things to it. All these things that we are supposed to get rid of are things that come naturally. That's because we have a sin nature. My parents never taught me to lie or cheat.. They didn't have to. I already knew those things. They came naturally. The Bible's secret to sanctification is that 'putting off' bad habits only works when you put on good ones, and when you start by "putting on" Christ!! When you focus on Christ -- when you center your life in His Word and start to obey His Word -- that's when the 'putting on' begins; and as you 'put on' Christ, you will find it natural (but not automatic) to put off the habits of the sinful flesh. Sanctification is all about taking off the clothing of unrighteousness and putting on the clothing of Christ.

Paul also wrote Philemon. I was blessed by this little letter because it reminds me just how powerful the gospel really is, and of how much it can change a man. Here is a brief overview of this one chapter book. Onesimus was a runaway slave, Philemon his master. The letter entertains, at least, the possibility that in order to make his escape good, Onesimus stole from the his master enough money to finance his getaway. That could be what Paul is referring to when he offers to personally pay whatever Philemon believes he was owed in this matter. Of course, it is equally possible that the amount due Philemon is simply the price of the labor of which he has been denied or even the price needed to redeem the freedom of Onesimus his slave. Regardless, like many runaway slaves, he found his way to Rome. He certainly knew of Paul, because a house church met in the home of his master. In any case, Onesimus found Paul in Rome. Perhaps he was desperate, maybe he felt guilty. For some reason he sought out the apostle, and he was converted. Paul sends him home with a message designed to secure forgiveness for him and re-instatement into his master's house, not just as a slave, but now as a brother in Christ. Paul expects that Onesimus will agree, and offers, as a reconciling brother, to pay off any debt that Onesimus may have from his own funds.

But Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. Do you understand why he did that? It is because the Gospel of God is a gospel of reconciliation, and when we have been reconciled to God through the shed blood of the cross, we must be reconciled to men. We have no other option. So Onesimus is asked to do a humbling and very risky thing. Paul asks him to return to his former master and make things right, to ask, I am sure, for forgiveness. Question: is there anybody you need to forgive?

That work will necessitate a humbling on our part -- we will have to go to the ones who have hurt us and offer forgiveness and to those we have wronged we owe both apology and tangible restitution if our sin has affected them in some material way. Full reconciliation demands that. I know that some of you watching this video have some very hard work ahead of you. I assure you that even as I speak I am praying that God will give you the courage and strength he gave to Onesimus.