

“HOLY & FAITHFUL”

5 Think About It

Colossians 2:6-15

Today we're continuing our little exploration of Paul's letter to the recently established Christian community in Colossae, a cosmopolitan town in what is now Turkey. Paul's friend Epaphras set up the church there and Paul is writing to these people from Ephesus where he is under house arrest for his preaching activities. He is particularly concerned that these new believers should ensure that they keep Jesus at the heart of all that they believe and all that they do. The world of Paul's day was like ours in many ways, not least in the proliferation of different philosophies and belief systems. All kinds of ideas were circulating, some of which seemed on the surface to have a lot in common with Christianity, but all of which had the potential to derail those who had committed themselves to following Jesus' ways. If you read the account of Paul's visit to Athens in *Acts 17*, you'll see that he had come up against this when he spoke to the philosophers at the Areopagus, people who "*spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas*" – a bit like listeners to Radio 4 or readers of *The Guardian*, really.

As we have already seen in this letter, having introduced himself, expressed his thanks for the Colossians' faith, set the focus of the letter on Jesus Christ, Paul has set out a little bit about his calling and his ministry, the goal of which is to help the Colossians grow and develop in their new-found faith and be "*encouraged in heart and united in faith*." He now goes on to begin to expand on that and to advise them about how to keep Jesus at the heart of all they believe and all they do – as we at Wade Street Church try now to be "*a church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church*."

He reminds them here that they have been "*rooted*" in Christ. That is the foundation of their faith. And here he uses what we call the perfect tense to express the idea that this has happened, a once and for all experience. The foundation has been laid – through the preaching of Epaphras – and that is the core of everything else. But now – in one of Paul's frequent mixed metaphors – they need to build on that. They are to be "*built up in Christ and strengthened in the faith*" – both verbs there are in the present tense, so this is to be something that is ongoing, something they need to keep working at. And it is, as Paul stresses again and again in his letters, to be done in the context of thankfulness to God. It's thanking God for who he is and for what he has done that gives us the confidence to keep on going, that gives us the expectation of even greater things to look forward to.

But, says Paul, if all that is going to happen, they need to guard against being led astray by the seemingly plausible but ultimately misleading teachings of those who were peddling a false gospel. As we've already noted in looking at this letter, there were various people who were pushing their own brand of religion, for all sorts of different reasons – some Jewish believers who were still insisting on such ritual observances as circumcision and keeping various festivals as necessary to being put right with God; other philosophers

who were teaching an early form of Gnosticism whereby it was the acquisition of secret knowledge and esoteric wisdom that was the key to salvation; and others who were still very much attached to their pagan ways and to the old gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon which they tried to incorporate into their new faith in Jesus. None of these will work, says Paul. All you need to focus on is Jesus. As ever, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of these verses in *The Message* drives the point home:

“Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double-talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that's not the way of Christ. Everything of God gets expressed in him, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything.”

These “*empty and deceptive philosophies*”, as Paul describes them are teachings that do not fit in with the gospel of grace that he is preaching. Now, Paul isn't against philosophy *per se* – after all, he is always encouraging people to think about what they believe, to weigh up his words, to reflect carefully on the ways in which faith in Jesus affects attitudes and world views. Paul is not, as some people would seek to portray him, anti-intellectual, advocating a blind and unthinking devotion to God that somehow by-passes the brain. A little while ago a French friend of mine posted on Facebook a cartoon from the infamous *Charlie Hebdo* magazine, the punchline of which was three religious people saying, “Oh no – we can't think for ourselves”. I didn't respond on Facebook, but it did occur to me that my friend must be very ignorant of such people as Rabelais, Racine, Pascal, Mauriac, Gide, Ellul and a long list of other French thinkers who made no secret of their Christian faith – just as we have Milton, John Donne, C S Lewis, T S Eliot, Tolkien, Stanley Spencer, Bono, Francis Collins, John Polkinghorne and many, many others whose Christian faith informs all that they do. It annoys me immensely when people say that we only follow Jesus because we're too stupid to think of anything else.

What Paul is saying here is actually that we should think about what we believe and should be wary of accepting uncritically any other ways, especially when they might be presented by people who seem outwardly to be very clever, or very pious. As we shall see as we move on, one of the groups in his sights here is the Hellenistic Jews, people who were mixing up their insistence on ritual and legalism with a mish-mash of Greek philosophy to try and make their religion more attractive to the clever Greeks of the day. He is warning the Colossian Christians off the various attempts to create a new religion out of the basically human-centred ideas that have been handed down to them – the “*tradition*” of v8 – and a lot of superstition about spiritual forces, what he calls the “*basic – or elemental – principles of the world – the cosmos*”.

And to counter that, he stresses once again the centrality of Jesus and this intriguing paradox that lies at the heart of what we believe – that he was fully God, and therefore superior to all other powers and authorities – and fully human, so able to empathise with our fragile and vulnerable “human condition”. In Jesus, fully God and fully man, humanity can be reconciled to God, restoring the relationship that the Creator originally intended to have with his creation. In Jesus we are offered a new start, which Paul likens here to being buried and raised to life again, renewed and restored as objects of God’s love. To use the phrase that Jesus himself used when talking to Nicodemus in John’s Gospel – a phrase that has been stretched about and loaded with all kinds of other meanings now – it’s like being “born again”.

And for that new life to work properly, all the old stuff has to be got rid of, which is why Paul tells us that “*God forgave us all our sins*” – all those wrong choices and foolish decisions are forgiven and we are given a new start, a blank sheet, if you like. And so that we can continue to live this new life, Jesus releases us from the influence of evil: we now have a choice. We can follow the way of Jesus and, with the help of his Spirit, live as he directs us.

You see, says Paul, Jesus overcame evil on the cross – that cataclysmic, cosmic battle that was fought out in his body as he hung dying there, taking into his own being all the conflict that was going on – and stripped evil of its power to affect us. We know that ultimately it can have no power over us. Our eternal future with God is assured if we are prepared to commit to him. Evil is still around – a quick glance at the television news or the front page of the newspaper will make that pretty obvious. Inequality, violence, racial injustice, greed, selfishness in its many and varied forms – they’re all still around. But they are now powerless to affect our relationship with God and they will eventually be destroyed altogether. Jesus defeated them, he “*made a public spectacle of them*”, like a triumphant general leading his defeated opponents in procession through his empire, and they know it. They’re just thrashing around trying to do as much damage as possible before they are finally annihilated. Jesus promises us that we can look forward to a bright, eternal, evil-free future with him if we are prepared to take him seriously.

And taking Jesus seriously is what Paul is all about, it’s what this letter is all about. Don’t get sucked into other ways of thinking, Paul says. Think about what you believe and check out that it is consonant with Jesus and his ways. Like millions of other people down through the centuries, I am a Christian because I thought it through – and continue to do so – and it works. And what is more, I can accept the forgiveness that is offered through Jesus and allow him to lead me forward. Don’t be deceived by big words and intellectual double-talk. Keep your eyes on Jesus and allow him to lead you on, to get the very best out of life here and now and to have the sure and certain hope of an eternal future with him in God’s renewed and restored Kingdom.

Paul unpacks all that a bit further in the next little section, which we'll consider next time, so tune in next week to see how that goes. Or, if you do want to think a bit more about this and explore it further – because we can't really do it all justice in a few minutes on Sunday morning (or whenever you're watching this) – you could join our on-line Alpha course – there will be details on the screen at the end of the service. But please – don't stop thinking about it. And “*continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*”

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Paul reminds the Colossians here that they have been "*rooted*" in Christ. The foundation has been laid – through the preaching of Epaphras – and that is the core of everything else. But now they are to be "*built up in Christ and strengthened in the faith*" – both verbs there are in the present tense, so this is to be something that is ongoing, something they need to keep working at. And it is to be done in the context of thankfulness to God. It's thanking God for who he is and for what he has done that gives us the confidence to keep on going, that gives us the expectation of even greater things to look forward to.

But, says Paul, if all that is going to happen, they need to guard against being led astray by the seemingly plausible but ultimately misleading teachings of those who were peddling a false gospel. (If you have a copy of *The Message* read vv8-10 in there.)

These "*empty and deceptive philosophies*", as Paul describes them are teachings that do not fit in with the gospel of grace that he is preaching. Now, Paul isn't against philosophy *per se* – after all, he is always encouraging people to think about what they believe, to weigh up his words, to reflect carefully on the ways in which faith in Jesus affects attitudes and world views. He is not advocating a blind and unthinking devotion to God that somehow by-passes the brain. What Paul is saying here is actually that we should think about what we believe and should be wary of accepting uncritically any other ways, especially when they might be presented by people who seem outwardly to be very clever, or very pious. He is warning the Colossian Christians off the various attempts to create a new religion out of the basically human-centred ideas that have been handed down to them – the "*tradition*" of v8 – and a lot of superstition about spiritual forces, what he calls the "*basic – or elemental – principles of the world – the cosmos*".

And to counter that, he stresses once again the centrality of Jesus – that he was fully God, and therefore superior to all other powers and authorities – and fully human, so able to empathise with our fragile and vulnerable "human condition". In Jesus, fully God and fully man, humanity can be reconciled to God, restoring the relationship that the Creator originally intended to have with his creation. For that new life to work properly, "*God forgave us all our sins*" and Jesus releases us from the influence of evil: we now have a choice. We can follow the way of Jesus and, with the help of his Spirit, live as he directs us.

Jesus overcame evil on the cross and stripped evil of its power to affect us. We know that ultimately it can have no power over us. Our eternal future with God is assured if we are prepared to commit to him. Evil is still around but powerless to affect our relationship with God.

Think about what you believe and check out that it is consonant with Jesus and his ways. Keep your eyes on Jesus and allow him to lead you on.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) Why do you think thankfulness is so important to Paul? How can it help us in our daily lives as Christians?
- 2) What kinds of "*hollow and deceptive philosophies*" are current today? Why do you think they are so popular? How can we counter them as Christians?
- 3) What do you understand by "*you have been given foulness in Christ*" (v10)?
- 4) How do you explain the presence of evil in the world today, if Jesus defeated evil on the cross?
- 5) Why is it important to keep thinking about what we believe? And how can we do that but not end up over-intellectualising it all?