

Expository Studies in Colossians

by Ray C. Stedman

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WHERE HOPE BEGINS

by Ray C. Stedman

It is with a sense of excitement and anticipation that I begin with you a series of studies in Paul's letter to the Colossians. This is one of the prison letters of the apostle, written, most scholars believe, while he was a prisoner in Rome, although one scholar makes out a good case for an imprisonment in Ephesus. It is not really of any great importance as to where the apostle was when he wrote this letter: the important thing is the message of the letter itself. It was written to a church located in what we now call Turkey, in the Roman province of Asia Minor, about one hundred miles south and east of Ephesus. Near Colossae were two other cities, Laodicea and Hierapolis, located about ten miles apart on the Lycus river.

The church at Colossae was one of two New Testament churches (the other was Rome) that Paul never visited before he wrote to them. It was founded under the ministry of a man named Epaphras, who is introduced in the opening verses of this letter. Of these three cities, Colossae was the smallest and the least important. But this church at Colossae became the founder of other churches which started up in the nearby cities. This letter also is connected closely with the letter to Philemon, who was a businessman friend of Paul and a citizen of Laodicea.

In many ways the letter to the Colossians is very similar in its teaching to the Ephesian letter. Some of you may ask, if that is the case, why do we need a letter to the Colossians? The answer is, because it is not quite the same. Colossians has a distinctive message, one that is extremely relevant to people living in our area today. It is primarily a letter of hope: the hope that comes by means of the gospel. At the time it was written, there was a serious threat to the faith of the Colossians. A garbled mixture of religious error, arising from both a Jewish and Greek background, was threatening the church.

Such an uncertain theological atmosphere, where different religious ideas compete with one another, is always an indication of great unrest in society. It indicates that people have lost their bearings and do not know quite what to believe. That condition is reflected in the letter to the Colossians and you will recognize it is what we face today. We are assaulted on every side by cultists and various philosophies, all of them claiming to be the

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 hopelessness of the 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 friend. This woman had been for years an outstanding Christian, but her husband was an alcoholic who had brought great grief to the family. He had stopped drinking for a year but, much to his wife's chagrin, had gone back to it again. Last week when he returned home from a late evening of drinking he found a note from his wife with 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, teenage suicide is rising to unprecedented heights. Alcoholism, drug abuse, a hurtful lifestyle, homosexuality, financial failure, broken marriages, false friends and failed health are some of the causes for people losing hope. Some here today may be struggling to keep a sense of hope. The glory, the zing, has gone out of life. That is how 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." But it is really not true. At times we all lose hope, and it is not always because of loss or failure. Right here in Silicon 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 before. Years 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 seriousness of their situation. After we left that night the man opened his heart to Christ, but the story I heard recently 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 here 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 always includes sisters as well---"sistern," 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 ought to 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 he created them, and he named them man." Thus, women have as much right to the word "man" as males do. They 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 chauvinist 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 favorite words of the apostle. He uses this triad in several of his letters. In 1 Thessalonians he writes about "your work

of faith," "your labor of love," and "your patience of hope." Many of you have already remembered that 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 faith. And where does faith come from? The NIV puts it this way: "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." It is extremely important to recognize that these wonderfully warm words, faith, love and hope, are related. Notice that two of them are four-letter words (love, hope), so not all four-letter words are bad. These words mark what we could 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 found in 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 mule for the first time: "I don't know what you are but you must be a Christian; you look just like grandpa!" But the word holy really means "separated unto God"---or in modern terminology, "claimed by God." Christians are 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 the "Holy Land" because it peculiarly belongs to God, more than any other spot on earth. In that sense, therefore, "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 him.

Paul also calls them "faithful brethren." Here is the first hint of the struggles going on in the church at Colossae. There were strange doctrinal ideas floating about in an effort to upset these people and turn them away from their faith. But Paul is encouraging them to remain "faithful brethren"---consistent, dependable, genuine believers, because of a constant supply of love and hope from the Spirit (verse 8). By the way, that reference in verse 8 is the only time the Holy Spirit is referred to in this letter. It is not because the truth about the Spirit is not important, but Paul is not focusing on the Spirit's work in this letter; rather he is dealing with the results of the Spirit's work, faith and love arising out of renewed hope.

The important thing is to notice that hope produces faith, and faith in turn grows into love. Hope is the root, faith is the plant, and love is the fruit. Thus, hope is foundational. This gives rise to the question, what produces hope? We all desperately need hope. Without hope men lose the desire to live. We have all had hopeless moments when we felt like saying, "What is the use of going on?" What, then, produces hope? Here is Paul's answer, "hope stored up for you in heaven and which you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come unto you."

Hope is awakened by the gospel. That is the good news. The gospel addresses itself to losers. Not to the successful, but to the failures, the weak, the empty, the lost among us---and it gives them hope. When nothing else can give them hope, the gospel will. But how does hearing the story of Jesus: his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection and his coming by the Spirit, give hope that awakens faith and stimulates love for others? The answer is in this one phrase, "the hope stored up for you in heaven."

To most, that immediately suggests life after death. After this life we will go to be with the Lord and all the glory of eternity will then be ours. That is a wonderful hope, but that is not what this phrase means. If we take it that way, it gives credence to Marx's accusation that "Religion...is the opium of the people." If all the gospel offers to Christians is that they will go to heaven when they die, this may well tend to make them content with their lot on earth and do nothing to correct or improve their conditions. That is the accusation of the Communists. They say we are putting people to sleep, turning them away from changes they should make if only they got stirred up about the problems and injustices of society. That charge is not without some merit if this is all the gospel offers.

But though it is a wonderful truth that there is hope of life after death, this translation obscures what is really being said. The singular word "heaven" is what misleads us. What the Greek text actually says is, "hope is available to you in the heavens"---plural. This term "the heavens" (or, as it appears in the letter to the

Ephesians, "the heavenlies"), is a reference not to heaven after death, but to the invisible spiritual kingdom that surrounds us on all sides right now. Thus, what this is saying here is that the gospel reveals there is hope for 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 right now, whatever you are facing, in your moment of weakness peril, or hopelessness, Jesus is available to you. His strength can be imparted to you, his wisdom granted to you to steady you, strengthen you and make 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 your spirit 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 us. If that friend is the Lord of Glory himself, what tremendous hope there is in that fact. That is what this means here: the hope that is in the gospel. Hebrews 11 says of Moses that "he endured because he saw him who was invisible." That is what Paul writes to the Colossians about: an invisible reality that is available right now in 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 great Christian philosopher, said, "The test of any religion is not whether it pleases us or is comfortable, but 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 lack hope, feel defeated, cast down, or betrayed, Jesus stands there, available to you. That is the word of the gospel. He offers to go with you to face the drug pusher. He offers his love and his acceptance when loneliness or horniness tempt you to wrongful sexual activity. He offers to steady you in times of pressure and stress. And he offers forgiveness and restoration if there is any failure.

That is what the apostle now affirms, saying to the Colossians in verse 6:

"All over the world this gospel is producing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth."

I have come to see that this is the most neglected truth among Christians. I am always amazed at how many Christians, facing difficulty and trial, give up because there is no human help available. The woman I told you about earlier who took her own life, knew about Jesus. But she did not avail herself of him at the moment of pressure. She gave up, and in that moment of unsupported stress did a deed that she could not reverse.

I confess that in my own life it is easy to look only for human help, forgetting that God's help is instantly available to me. We are like the little girl who kept calling for someone to sit with her in her bedroom at night. Her mother told her, "Now you will be all right. Don't worry. The angels will be with you." "But I don't want angels," the child replied, "I want people with skin on their faces." Many of us feel that way. We do not want invisible help. We are angry and resentful if human help is not available. But God will sometimes deliberately deny us human help in order that we may learn how much greater is the help waiting for us from his invisible kingdom.

Further, Paul says, this help works anywhere in the world. I think this is one of the most amazing proofs of the authenticity of the Bible. I know all the apologetic arguments for biblical authenticity, but I have to confess they do not help me much at times. All of it can be argued away by various intellectual approaches. Apologetics do not really steady and strengthen our faith very much. Oh, it helps at times to relieve some of the problems we face in working out our faith, but the primary proof of Scripture is, it works! Right when you need it, and anywhere in the world.

My wife and I were in Northern Ireland this summer, meeting with young Christians in the most troubled part of that troubled country. At a conference one evening there was an interview with a man who had been a member of the IRA, the Irish Republican Army, the terrorist group that has caused so much bloodshed in

Northern Ireland. He had been a wild and rough man, raised in a Catholic area, and who would have nothing 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 even if he had to break the legs of the person who refused to carry them out. He had been in prison several times and during one of those prison experiences somebody gave him a New Testament. Reading it, he heard for the first 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 a change the gospel makes!

That kind of thing had been happening also in Colossae. It was happening all over the world, wherever 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 the man who started it all. We do not know much about him, although he is mentioned in a couple of the other letters of Paul. He evidently was a layman, and had probably been part of the group that Paul himself taught 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 special curriculum, taught by Paul. Many who were present went out through all the provinces spreading the truth, and among them was Epaphras. He came into the insignificant city of Colossae and probably started a home 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. That began to excite them and awaken them in their hopeless condition. They found hope again, and faith and love came along with it. A healed community of beautiful people came into being and caught the attention of many in 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 if you only knew the Bible like one of the pastors, then you could be of use to God. But don't you see that you already are the important people, the true evangelists? You are out there, rubbing shoulders with people who have no hope, hearing their sad stories, meeting them in the streets and in the stores, having coffee with them. You are the ones who can spread the word of hope. That is how the gospel spread throughout the Roman province of 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 will 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

reality, a word of truth that we can trust! Send us now back into our world, to our friends, our neighbors, the hopeless ones around us, and help us to demonstrate, by the joy and peace of our lives, that we have found the answer, we have found the place of hope. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Catalog No. 4019
Colossians 1:1-8
First Message
November 30, 1986

GROWING UP

by Ray C. Stedman

We are now well into the Christmas season, and everybody is enjoying the return of the great symbols of our faith in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus. The central symbol of Christmas, of course, is a baby. Perhaps the most loved carol is Martin Luther's cradle hymn, "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed/The little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head." Yes, it's wonderful to focus upon the baby Jesus but we sometimes idealize---even idolize---babies.

In all honesty, we who have been parents and grandparents know that babies are not always pleasant to be around. I have often quoted the description, "A baby is a digestive apparatus with a loud noise at one end and no responsibility at the other!" Babies are notoriously selfish and self-centered. Immediately upon birth they bear the imprint of the fall of Adam; their whole world is centered around themselves. That is all they think about, all they know. Those who take care of them long for the day when they will begin to learn self-control: to sleep all night, to become potty trained, and to feed themselves.

It is the same in the Christian life. The Scriptures liken new Christians to babies. Peter, in fact, says, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word that you may grow thereby." Like newborn babies starting out in life, new Christians are loved and welcomed; but they need special care and though they show a great deal of promise and potential, yet everybody waits and hopes for them to grow up.

In the letter to the Colossians we have come to that point in Paul's concern for these Colossian believers. The apostle has recognized the true Christian life of these believers. They have already shown the unmistakable marks of newborn babes in Christ. There is a new hope in their lives; a far cry from the hopelessness of their former lost condition. That hope is born of the fact that in the gospel they have learned that Jesus himself was available to them personally to help in the struggles of life. From that hope came faith: they believed that hope and had begun to count on Jesus' presence with them and to draw strength from him. Out of their faith, then, had come compassion and concern for others, especially their brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Those are the marks of a Christian: faith, hope, and love, as Paul so beautifully puts it in 1 Corinthians 13.

But now the apostle is concerned that they go on and grow up. This is also the emphasis of much of the New Testament. The weakness of the church in many places today is that Christians often remain babies all their lives. They settle down and never grow up. The church, as a result, flounders in weakness and turns many people off. It is growing up that is important, as Paul emphasizes in these words:

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. 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, with joy..."

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

Paul knows that the Colossian Christians are living in a dangerous world. As we go on in this letter we discover what is threatening them. A seething volcano of false teaching has begun to erupt and engulf them, threatening to destroy the simplicity of the faith that is producing such beauty and liberty in their lives. Paul is in Rome, a prisoner in chains, and unable to travel to Colossae, a thousand miles east, to help them. There is nothing he can do physically for them. But spiritually, he is a powerful prayer warrior who can create in their midst a tremendous opportunity to know truth that will free them and enable them to withstand the assault of 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 these believers. And yet he prays continually for them. When we come to statements like this in Scripture it is quite fair to ask, when did he do this? Day and night he is chained to a Roman guard, he never has a moment to himself. Awake or asleep, he is bound to his jailer. Furthermore, when he is awake, his friends are dropping by to see him to seek his counsel and instruction. He even ministers to the Roman guards, many of whom came to Christ, 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 of 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 blast them? That is what this is suggesting: that continual prayer arises constantly as a reaction to what you are going 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. This is what he means when he says, "we have not stopped praying for you." We can pray for each other in that same 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 might come to understand God's will. It is clear that this is the important thing to Paul. He knows that if they begin to 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 discover: where God wants them to go, and what God wants them to do. Most of their prayers are addressed with those thoughts in mind. What should I do today? Where should I go? Whom should I marry? etc. There is a deep and profound psychological principle involved in this. God knows us, and he knows that our behavior flows

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 such challenges are given.

God, too, knows that. The glory of the good news is that he has made us into something different than what we once were. Therefore the primary course in the curriculum of the Spirit is to learn who you are now, what God has made you to be, and, especially, your new relationship to him. This is beautifully captured in a verse 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 you to be and what he has made you to be. The more you understand who you now are, and what God has done to make you that, the more your behavior will automatically change and you will do the things that follow here in this 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 insights into human life---how to understand ourselves and how the world functions---which God reveals, but of 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 before he became a Christian, of his honors and his wealth and how sought---after his advice was by industrial leaders all over the country. But his inner life began to break down and he felt more and more hollow and empty. At last, when he took his six-year-old son, dead, out of a swimming pool, he began to read the Bible. As he read, there came a moment when he sat with his head in his hands saying, "My God, what an ass I've been." His 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 be realistic, then read and study your Bible to discover how God looks at things. Everything else is fantasy. It is like perfume advertisements on television; outrageous, out-of-this world fantasies. But that is the way the world 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 put it, "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, in his word. Then there will come, as you pray and seek his face, a clear vision of what needs to be done. What 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 it 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 follow if the

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 to be, though you don't deserve it at all---his child, cherished by him, your guilt and sin taken care of, and that God 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 others 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 about our 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!" Faith is what 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 around. Rather, they swim against the stream of life and stand firmly upon what he says, trusting him. That is what pleases 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; concern, compassion, encouragement, and help in a time of stress, bringing a word of peace into a troubled, hostile 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's will. Now he says that as they put these things into practice they will know God better than ever before. Seeking 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 in a life. People who know God are never bored for the opposite of knowing God is boredom. If you are bored, as 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 of which 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 says will happen as we "grow in the knowledge of God" and put into practice these three goals in our lives. This is what Jesus means when he says to the woman at the well, "I will put in you a well of water, springing up unto 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." These days

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 will 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 how 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 his 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 and angry. It takes power to resist these when you feel them rising within you. Every believer has that power, and the sign is that they lead quiet, cheerful lives, that hang in to the end. That is what is meant by endurance. The word is best translated "stick-to-it-iveness." People who have this quality don't quit. They hang in there with their relationships, despite the pressures of their work or their circumstances. Endurance is a word that relates 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 take revenge.

The third mark is that of joyful gratitude, a cheerful spirit that never gets discouraged. Years ago I read of a Christian businessman who had a cleaning woman named Sophie. He said to her one day, "Sophie, why are you 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-l-o-r-y doesn't spell 'growl.' That is what you do. You growl in tribulation. If you gloried in it, then you'd find 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 the knowledge of God.

The closing paragraph states clearly the three things that we can always be grateful for. We may in weakness feel like complaining about a few things, but we can always come back to these three things for they are continually true of every believer. The more we think about them, the more an attitude of gratitude will control our life. Paul continues,

"...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Such a marvelous statement of truth hardly needs any exposition. Here are three things to be grateful for. First, for privileges we don't deserve. We have been qualified by God (not ourselves) "to share in the inheritance of the saints," in the resources available to all the saints. What are these? A Father's love, a Savior's presence, a family of brothers and sisters to support and uphold, a certain destiny of glory after death. Nothing can take these away from us. If we remember these we can rejoice in the midst of whatever comes. These are privileges we don't deserve for which we have been qualified by God.

Secondly, there are perils from which we have been delivered: "He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness." Oh, what that ought to awaken within our minds! Think of the terrible things that might have happened to you if you had never become a Christian. Did you ever think where you would be if Christ had not intervened in your life? Knowing my own heart, my own rebellious spirit and devil-may-care attitude, I think I'd either be dead or in jail! I almost made it anyhow! But we have all been delivered, as if by one of those SWAT teams that snatch a victim out of a dangerous situation. So the Lord Jesus has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness," from increasing uncertainty about life and from groping after futile goals. He has delivered us from blindness and death.

The third category is pressures from which we have been freed: he has "brought us into the kingdom of the Son that he loves." We have been freed from the feeling of being unwanted. That is one of the most devastating feelings any human can experience: the feeling that nobody cares, nobody wants us, nobody loves

us. That is forever rendered untrue by the work of Jesus. He has brought us into his kingdom and, with him, 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 nothing against us as we begin again. Every day we start in afresh until we learn to do it right. God is with us. He cleanses the past continually. The forgiveness of sins is something we ought to rejoice in every day, because the burden and guilt of yesterday is no longer dragging us down. We are free to walk into liberty and peace. How grateful we should be for these incredible blessings!

Catalog No. 4020
Colossians 1:9-14
Second Message
December 7, 1986

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 eternal Son dwelt in a human body, thus "veiled in flesh the Godhead see." Every other doctrine of Christianity flows out of that great truth. If it be denied, one has denied the heart of Christian faith and has embraced heresy.

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 truths of the

Christian faith. The first paper delivered was on "The Living God." It was a marvelous statement of this central truth of all: that Jesus Christ is God. The paper developed the concept of the Trinity: that God does not exist as a single individual, but there are three persons who act together as one in the Godhead. The skeptics 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 do find in Scripture are passages where both the Son and the Spirit are described in terms that can only be applied to God himself. It is such a passage as this that we come to today in our studies in the letter to the Colossians. Here 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 see." Paul brings this truth boldly to the Colossian believers for two basic reasons. As we have already seen in this letter, he 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 and become vigorous, exemplary, compassionate Christians, forsaking their apathy and hostility and becoming whole people. Paul is well aware that they are in danger of losing their clear vision of Christ. That was the nature of the Colossian heresy which attacked the person of Jesus. They were in danger, therefore, of losing a 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 active in their lives here and now. Some churches seem to treat Jesus as the British treat their monarch: they strip him or her of all political power, and do not expect the sovereign to do anything at all except to look good. They treat their 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 face 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 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 hated 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 God, his work as Creator, and his continuing relationship to the worlds that he has made. Let us look in more detail at such claims. What does it mean that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God?" I have often described the 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 lying 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 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. They say that "firstborn of all creation" means that Jesus is the one born first, i. e. the first one to be created. It is true that in Greek the word that is translated here "firstborn" is used of Jesus himself in the Bethlehem story. Luke, chapter 2, says that Mary brought forth her "firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid

him in a manger." Thus, say the cults, the word "firstborn" clearly implies that Jesus is the first of several children born to Mary. Scripture reveals there were other children born to her: the brothers and sisters of Jesus who would come later. Used in that sense, of course, it would mean that Jesus is the first created being. Thus, 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 translated "firstborn" in the sense of heir, the owner, the possessor of creation. This is certainly the meaning it conveys here. I found myself recently standing next to Dr. Carl Henry, whom I regard as the greatest theologian alive today. 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 Old Testament. Esau, one of the twin sons of Isaac, was born first, therefore he had the right of the firstborn to inherit the estate of his father. But through a strange series of events, Jacob, the other twin, tricked his father into conferring that blessing upon him. He stole from Esau, by trickery, the right of firstborn. Yet that act was honored of God. The right to be firstborn was transferred from Esau to Jacob, and Jacob became the heir 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 brought his two boys before him, 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, known only to God and himself perhaps, Jacob crossed his hands and laid his left hand on Manasseh, the one born first, and his right hand upon Ephraim. Thus, Ephraim became the "firstborn," though he was not the one born first. By means of a cross the right of the firstborn was transferred to the younger son!

This is an example of how marvelously Scripture handles events. There is significance in even the slightest details. Thus, we may rightly apply this title to Jesus, as not the one born first of all creation, but the Owner, the Possessor, of creation.

Paul goes on to describe the work of Jesus.

"For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him."

That verse clearly reveals that Jesus could not be part of God's creation, for all created things---all created things---were created by him. He is, then, not a part of that "all." Notice the words, "by him" and "for him." He was the agent of creation and the purpose of it as well. The whole of the cosmos was made for him! This is what Paul also declares in that great Christological passage in Philippians. The time is coming when at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." The realistic thing to do today is to live with that knowledge in our world, remembering that Jesus not only created all things but he is also the reason for it all.

Creation, of course, involves the work of the whole Trinity. It is proper to say that the Father willed there should be a creation. All the initiatory movements of history begin with the Father. He willed it. The Son, then, planned it. He programmed it and designed it, even to its slightest detail as its Architect and Designer. The Spirit is the executor: He carried it out. He made it actually appear, according to the plan and program of the Son.

A familiar incident in the gospel of John, the first miracle of Jesus, illustrates this. At the wedding feast in Cana the wine ran out and his mother said to him simply, "They have no more wine." She apparently leaves it up to Jesus. He makes very clear in his response to her that he is not going to act because she asked him to. He

replies, "Woman, what have I to do with you?" That is not uttered unkindly. He is simply declaring that her request is not the motive for his actions. But he does act. And, as he declared in many places, he acts only because the Father tells him to. Thus the initiation of this act is from the Father. The Father willed that when his Son appeared on earth there would be miracles that would accompany his appearance to support his claims 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 with water." The servants did so. It must have taken fifteen or twenty minutes at least to fill those great thirty-gallon jars with water. Our Lord waited until they did. Then, without a word--I always appreciate this: there is no fanfare, no ostentation, no magic---without a word of command the water became wine. The Spirit had 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 being invaded by an alien power. The fitness of the Christian miracles, and their difference from these mythological miracles, lies in the fact that they show an invasion by a power which is not alien. They are what might be expected to happen when nature is invaded, not simply by a god, but by the God of nature, by a power which is outside nature's jurisdiction, not as a foreigner but as a Sovereign. They proclaim that he who has come is not merely a king but the King---nature's King and ours!

Surely that is what the apostle Paul is proclaiming here when he says that Jesus is the "creator of all things...things were made by him."

Now, as this verse goes on to say, that includes more than merely the material universe around us: more than stars, galaxies, superstars, planets, and solar systems, or even trees, grass, mountains and seas. It includes the earth, Paul says, but also heaven. Both the visible and the invisible. It would also include all forces. Electricity was invented by Jesus (not as a man, but as the Eternal Son) before the creation of the world. It would include radiation, magnetism, and the peculiar and mysterious dance of electrons from one level of energy to another within the atom that makes light. All this was the design of the Eternal Son.

But not only forces, but concepts and attitudes as well: grace, mercy, truth, love, and life itself. Jesus is the originator of all life. And, as Paul specifies here, a whole pantheon of invisible beings (and their visible counterparts in earthly government): "thrones and rulers and powers and authorities"---all were created by him.

The Colossian heresy here becomes visible in our modern experience as well. The Colossians began to believe, because of the Greek teachers among them, that the universe consisted of a "hierarchy of angels." One must begin down at the bottom, with raunchy, unpleasant angels, and work one's way up through the whole hierarchy to the good angels and, finally, to God. From that idea has come the eastern concept of reincarnation for that too was part of the Colossian heresy.

We find a counterpart today, not only in the theory of reincarnation, but also in horoscopes and astrology---the idea of stars influencing and governing our lives. The claim that Transcendental Meditation is the means of getting in touch with invisible beings is another example. We are told that there are Astral Teachers and Divine Masters who appear from time to time to impart degrees of knowledge to the human race. Gradually, we are told, this is to result, after centuries and centuries of progress, in our being lost in the Divine presence. All this is nothing new. It is very old, but it is also new, appearing again and again in history. This is what the apostle labors to correct. He is telling the Colossians, "Jesus is above all angels. You are freed from bondage to these lesser beings when you see the true authority and power of your risen Lord."

Bishop Lightfoot, who wrote in the last century, captures this well in a paraphrase of Paul's words:

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, far above all thrones or dominations, all principdoms 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 age.

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 had 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 in a "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 his eternity as the Son of God. As C.S. Lewis has pointed out, he is over creation as a King and a Sovereign, not subject to 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 through 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 that was a very small instrument.

Something holds the atom together with enormous, incredible power. That power, according to the Word of God (both here in Colossians and in the letter to the Hebrews) is vested in Jesus. He has the authority to rule 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 intimately observe the beauty, order, and power inherent in the natural world as well as in the world of humanity, yet who fail to see the Power behind it all; the ordered Intelligence that possesses and originates all these things. I do not understand how a man like Carl Sagan can work in the field of astronomy, knowing of the great secrets that are now coming to light in the universe, and yet go on breathing air which God has supplied, eating the 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 only man matters! 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. This first century yuppie, expensively dressed, very wealthy, young and handsome, knelt at the feet of this apparent peasant from Galilee and said, "Lord, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus looked into the heart of that young man and saw the hunger and emptiness of it. Wealth had brought him no lasting pleasure; Jesus saw his anguish and the desire for something more. He tested him as to whether he understood the Law and when he saw that the young man was in earnest about finding the secret of life, he told him to do an unusual thing: "Go 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." Some say that what Jesus is teaching is that it is wrong to be wealthy. But this is answered by the fact that he had friends among the wealthy of his own day, yet he never rebuked them for their wealth. That is not the issue of the story. What Jesus is saying is, "Your money keeps you from seeing what you desperately need. Get rid of it, 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 to which 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 lostness among people. We are a generation adrift. We have thrown out all the absolutes, and found ourselves adrift on the tossing ocean of life. No one has an anchor any more. What men desperately need is a King, a God, an Authority, an Anchor to cling to. I am convinced we will never solve the terrible drug traffic until we teach people that there is an answer to the hunger and anguish of their empty lives. We cannot stop the drug traffic by simply confiscating all the drugs that come into this country. Drugs are merely a symptom of the terrible 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. In Jesus is 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 one we used to sing in the early days of PBC, but I do not hear it much any more. The words are simplicity 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.

Catalog No. 4021
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 1 represents an early Christian hymn which Paul is quoting. These verses may represent the very first of all Christmas 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 creation, the new humanity. We have lost the tune for this hymn, but we still have these words which focus upon our 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 churches seem to forget it. The church is something eternally new which the world has never seen before. It is quite 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. I am afraid that the most widespread concept is that the church is a religious country club, operated for the enjoyment and benefit of the members; it makes its own rules and exists for its own purposes. That is a far cry indeed 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 glory. I fear some of us give them good reason to think that! Then there are those, like the Colossians, who are a group of eager beaver religious fanatics, running after every new doctrine that comes along, especially if it offers 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, which is 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 to carry 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 knob up on top, with more or less hair, we call the head. It is the control center of the body. The rest of the body, with 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 since most of you seem to be well attached. When I was a boy growing up in Montana, we did not buy chickens at the grocery store all nicely packaged in plastic. I had to go out and run one down, and then remove its head. A chicken with its head cut off acts very strangely. It does not simply quietly perish, but jumps and runs around, out of control for a minute or two, before it finally dies. Churches that lose their awareness of the Head are like that---they too go out of control. They do not know what to do. They run about and become involved in things they ought not to have anything to do with. They have, for all practical purposes, lost their Head.

That was the trouble at Colossae. In chapter two Paul says they "have lost connection to the head." It is essential, therefore, that a church must have its Head in place and functioning: supplying direction, maintaining order, giving it health, solving its difficulties, coordinating its activities, and supplying to every single member its own kind of life. That is what your physical head does, and that is what Jesus, as Head of the body, desires to do. This must find application on an individual basis. Oftentimes we fail to see that a church consists of individuals. You are the church! It cannot act as a corporate body very often---it is not expected to. Yet, because we have false concepts of the church, we often expect the corporation to act for us. But Christ's body is not designed that way. Each individual is directly related to the Head. It is he who should direct each of us in our activities through the week. That is where the church truly functions, not here on Sunday morning. Here is where the church is taught by the Head, where we learn how to function. But we actually function away from here, in our homes and neighborhoods. There we must relate directly to the Head, expecting him to open doors, provide energy, wisdom, comfort and forgiveness. That is where the church touches society on every side.

Yet, despite the fact that we are to function as individuals, we must never forget that we belong to the whole, not only this local body but the whole body of Christ all over the world. We are all related to one another. This marvelous mystery of relationship constitutes one of the most exciting things in the world today. When the church functions properly it is far and away the most powerfully effective body on earth. That is what Jesus means when he said, "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world." As individuals we must remember that our part is to respond to personal direction from the Head: to do as he says and obey his word.

Now Paul tells us, in two marvelously descriptive phrases, exactly why Jesus is the Head of the body. First, he says, "he is the beginning." The beginning of what? The beginning of the church! He is the One from whom the church gets its life. There are several "beginnings" in Scripture. The Bible opens on that note: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." But that is not the beginning referred to here. There is another "beginning" in the gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word." That goes back even before creation. But that is not the "beginning" spoken of here either. The "beginning" here is the same one which John speaks of in his letter: "We know him who was from the beginning." He is referring to the beginning of the church, when the disciples saw Jesus, touched him and handled him. From the risen life of Jesus flows the new life of the church. That is what Paul teaches so clearly in 2 Corinthians 5: "If anyone be in Christ he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, all things have become new." We are part of a new humanity that God is bringing forth upon this earth, a humanity that is "bought with a price": "You are not your own, you are bought with a price." Remember, "He who knew no sin was made sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

This should remind us of that simple, often misunderstood parable, that our Lord told among several others, in Matthew 13. He says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." Unfortunately, that parable has been interpreted to mean that Jesus is the pearl of great price, and that when we see what a valuable person he is we will sell all we have and buy him. But that is entirely contrary to every other teaching of Scripture. We do not buy God. We cannot purchase him or purchase our salvation in any sense. We have nothing to offer him! We must come, as the old hymn puts it, "Nothing in my hand I bring,/Simply to thy cross I cling." No, it is Jesus who is the merchant looking for a fine pearl. And he finds one: it is the church! For it, "he went away and sold

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 in bed do to us. It is very uncomfortable, and the oyster sets about getting rid of it. What it does is to cover the irritating grain of sand with a beautiful nacre that hardens into a lustrous and gorgeous pearl. That is how the church was born. It emerges from the wounded side of Jesus. It was the irritation that we represent by our sinful lives that put him to death, and he covers it over and heals it, making it into a beautiful pearl of great value. That is the church. That is what Paul is describing here: Jesus himself is the beginning of the church.

Then, secondly, Paul says, Jesus is "the firstborn from among the dead." Many take that to mean he is the first one ever to be resurrected. That is certainly true. The resurrection of Jesus is the only resurrection that has ever occurred on this earth. Lazarus, and all the others who came back from the dead, were simply resuscitated: they came back to the same life they had left. We may even feel a bit sorry for them because they had to come back to take it up again. But Jesus was truly resurrected. He was given a glorified life: he came from the grave at a far higher level than he went in. He returned in a glorified body, subject to different laws and governed by different principles. But that is not what is meant here. That is what Paul calls "the first-fruits of them that slept." But here "firstborn" means what it does in verse 15. We have already seen that it means the owner, the possessor, of the old creation. Here then it means the owner, possessor, of the new creation. He is the One who alone possesses the resurrection life that he gives to each of us. That is what John is saying in his first letter, in chapter 5, verse 11: "This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life [deathless life, resurrection life], and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." He may be moral, he may be a nice person, but he does not yet possess the life of eternity, the resurrection life of Jesus, because that life comes from Jesus alone.

Now it is a clear biblical fact that Christians who have received Christ and been born into the new creation have this life. That is the reason they can no longer excuse themselves for wrong behavior by saying, "Well, after all, I'm only human." It is true you are human yet in the body, in the flesh, and that is why you are tempted, but because you also have a new life it means you do not need to yield to that temptation; there is now a new power within.

I feel constrained to get this across to people. When you become a Christian you have a new source of power which the world knows nothing about. Therefore, you are expected to live at a different, higher level. And you can. You cannot excuse yourself by saying, "I'm only human." True, that is why temptations come, but God has given us an ability to say no to these and to say yes to the power of Christ. We will not feel powerful---we are never expected to---but we have the power to say no; that is what the new creation is all about.

Thus, because our Lord is Master of the old creation (the old, material universe all around us)---and also master of a whole new humanity that is now coming into being, Paul goes on to say that he is both firstborn of the old and firstborn of the new "in order that he might have the supremacy." There is nothing left out of his control. One of the old Christmas carols captures this beautifully,

King of kings yet born of Mary,
As of old on earth he stood,
Lord of lords in human nature,
In the body and the blood.
He will give to all the faithful,
His own self for heavenly food.

That is the difference that being a Christian makes: we have Christ himself dwelling in us, and that enables us to be more than we once were.

Paul now turns from our Lord's position as Head of the body to his work as the reconciler of all things.

"For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his

blood, shed on the cross."

Notice how carefully the apostle links together the reconciling work of Christ and his deity. Jesus had to be 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 themes of Scripture find some way to reduce these theological statements to contemporary terms, because, as he put it, "the world is lost without a sense of God. Men and women everywhere desperately need to know that there is 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 that can 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 above all the others?" That is often called "the scandal of exclusivity," the exclusive claim that only one religious founder is both God and man. As C. S. Lewis well states, If you had gone to Buddha and asked him, "Are you the Son of Brahma?," he would have said, "My son, you are still in the vale of illusion." If you had gone to Socrates and asked, "Are you Zeus?" he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, "Are you Allah?" he would first have rent his clothes, and then cut your head off. If you had asked Confucius, "Are you Heaven?" I think he would have probably replied, "Remarks which are not in accordance with nature are in bad taste."

There is only One who claims that he is both God and man. This explains the name which the shepherds whispered when they came into the stable after the angels' announcement. They knelt in awe before the Babe lying there and breathed the one word, "Immanuel" (God with us). He is the reason for the season! I want to tell you it makes me angry to see the commercialization of Christmas. All this flim-flam about trees, and presents, and Santa Claus tends to obscure this marvelous truth: that Baby was "God reduced to a span/Incomprehensibly a man" and he is the only hope we have out of the mess we find ourselves in. That is the glory of Christmas.

But because Jesus is both God and man he is able to bridge the gap, "to reconcile to himself all things." This verse has been used as a proof text to substantiate the idea of universal salvation; that ultimately every person and every being is going to be redeemed. Even the devil and his angels (this concept maintains), and even the wickedest of men such as Hitler and Stalin and those who are far worse because of spiritual evil are someday going to be redeemed. There may be a temporary punishment, but eventually everything in the universe will be restored to God, and there will be no hell and no eternal judgment. That is the teaching of universalism.

It is true that the word "reconcile" upon which this whole teaching hangs, does mean salvation in the case of those who believe. It is used in that sense in the very next verses, where Paul goes on to say,

"Once you were 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."

That is clearly salvation in its fullest degree. But "reconcile" often means things other than salvation. This is where we must be very careful. Heresy can creep in at places where we do not expect it. It is wrong to take a single meaning of a word and press it everywhere as its only meaning.

If you look elsewhere in Scripture you will find that "reconcile" is broader than salvation. In Ephesians 2, for instance, Paul uses it of the healing of hostility between Jew and Gentile. He says Jesus has come "and broken down the middle wall of partition and reconciled Jew and Gentile in one body," by which he means the hostility is ended. Not that every Jew and every Gentile will be saved, but they will be able to live in harmony; that is his point. In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle says that husbands and wives are to be "reconciled" to one another. There may be some husbands and wives here who need to have their hostility end and begin to live together in peace. Parents and children need reconciling at times. Friends often need it. Christmas is a time when reconciliation between estranged family members takes place more than it does at other times of the year.

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 sudden 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 God permit evil?" 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 at times? Why are innocent children raped, tortured, and killed, or ruined in mind and body by drugs or molestation? Why were six million Jews gassed to death in Germany? Why were millions of others elsewhere shot, 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 rage in so many? At last this question is to be answered. At last we will learn why it was necessary to allow evil. Then we will see it was part of the working out of God's program. Every hurt will be resolved, every tear will be 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 in this regard. What glorious language he employs to picture an earth where nothing is out of step, nothing is eccentric, nothing is out of balance; everything is in harmony with everything else. That is what this declares. Surely this is what 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 is where 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. We put crosses up in our sanctuaries, not to make us think that the cross was a beautiful piece of wood, for it was a dirty, bloody, rugged means of death. But out of that death has flowed life to all the universe. That is what this is telling us. We find it described very clearly in chapter two of this letter, in the words, "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (2:15). It is the cross that is the center of all life.

Christians should never allow themselves to forget that wonderful scene recorded in the book of Revelation, where John is caught up into glory and sees the end of history, the end of all human affairs. Here is how he describes it:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they said: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped.

That is what Christmas initiates: it is the beginning of the great process that shall end in the perfect harmony of all creation. We are privileged to have a part in proclaiming this good news right now, and in our hearts to give honor and glory to the Lord Jesus, even before the rest of creation joins in the song. Revelation closes with this reminder:

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life... He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all God's people. Amen. (Rev. 22:17ff)

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 the Marines, then you can be all that you can be. I don't believe that! Does anybody? But a word like that has strong appeal. Everybody wants to be all that he can be. I have never met anyone who doesn't want to be all that he feels himself capable of being. We all hunger for that. No matter how degraded, downcast or 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 week from relatives, friends, and on the media, describing endless shame, hurt, pain, murder, divorce, cruelty, abuse and personal failure. Is there any real possibility of reversing this in someone's life? Can the downward slide be arrested?

The good news of the gospel answers with a resounding Yes! It can be done! In fact, that is what the apostle 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 himself undertakes to make this change! I read this morning a statement from a man who felt he heard God saying to him one day, "I wish you would leave all this reconciling of things to me, since you are so hopelessly unequipped for it, and that you would use whatever influence you have with your fellow fussers and worriers 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 reconcile 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 three stages, and 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 all of us who are now Christians were "alienated from God." We did not have any use for God. We did not take him into our reckoning. We did not consider him important. We started and ended each day without a thought of 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 of life, 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 God. We did not want anything to do with him. You remember how that felt, don't you? We avoided God. We thought he would interfere with our plans; that he was a cosmic killjoy out to make us live uneventful and unhappy 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. That sounds as though evil behavior is the cause of inner alienation and hostility toward God. But it is quite the other way around. It is inner alienation, estrangement from God and hostility toward him, that causes 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 estrangement, our brokenness and hurt, and that if we came to him in faith he would deliver us. So we came. 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 in the life of a religious fanatic, but it was a moment when the great enemies all men face were conquered; when death was overcome and all the evil powers against mankind were set at naught. Thus our whole life was changed.

Just this past week I received a letter from a man describing the change that occurred in his life. Here is 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, in fact, 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 as Lord. But it is a process that is headed for a specific goal, which, according to the apostle, is "to present you holy [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---don't miss this---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 proof of reality. Many people start out the Christian life, filled with joy because they have found a new sensation. But it does not last. Somewhere along the line it fades. Finally, they set it all aside and go back to the way they once were. That is a sign there was never real faith at the beginning. It is continuance that proves reality. Someone has well said, "If your faith fizzles before you finish, it is because it was faulty from the first!" You get an "F" for that performance! That does not mean that faith cannot waver and wobble at times. It does with all of us. Sometimes faith grows dim, but true faith never ceases. We never give up the realization that God has changed us. There is a new attitude, a new life imparted, and that is the sign that we cannot give up being a Christian. I received a phone call from a young man one day who said,

"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 think that is what you ought to do." There was a long silence for a moment, then he said, "You know I can't do that." 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 them. Oftentimes that part was played long before we ever came to Christ, but when we learn of it we are greatly 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. I do not know where that man is or what has happened to him, but his name and the memory of that occasion are still fresh in my mind.

Some may wonder what is meant by the statement, "the gospel...that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven." How could that be, we ask? When Paul wrote this he had preached in a few cities of the Roman Empire, which was but a small part of the planet on which we live. Then, they did not even know about North and South America. How could this statement be true? We find the answer in chapter 10 of Paul's letter to the Romans. There he argues that there must be preachers who must be sent, etc., in order for people to hear. Nevertheless, he asks, "Have they not heard?" Then he quotes from Psalm 19, "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." The psalm states, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork." Nature is the first preacher of the gospel. There is order in the universe. There is clearly intelligence behind it all. Hebrews says, "He that comes to God must believe that he is [that is what nature tells us] and that he is a rewarder of those that diligently seek him." If anyone, anywhere, responds to the facts that nature presents about the existence of a God of power and glory, and begins to seek him, then God himself assumes the responsibility to bring him to hear of the Redeemer, the Savior. It is still true that "there is no other name, under heaven, given among men whereby we must be saved." God will bring the seeking soul to Jesus.

The second thing Paul states is that the character of those who truly preach the gospel is that they are servants. They count it a delight and joy to be used of God. This is a major distinguishing mark by which you can tell whether a preacher is true or false. If you listen to the television evangelists today, as I frequently have done, you can hardly escape the feeling that Christianity is a matter of trying to get something from God--to get God to work for us. We humans are the ultimate reason for all that happens in life. But the truth is, we Christians are given the high privilege of serving the Living God, of God using us in our weakness, failure, folly and faultiness to proclaim this truth to others. The realization that the God of Glory is willing to do that should create in us a deep sense of gratitude that we can be his servants. That is the difference between the false and true witnesses. The false think God works for them; the true delight in the fact that God is using them, and they they do not regard it as an intrusion or a burden, but the highest honor that could ever be given.

But, says Paul, such service involves much pain and sacrifice: "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." What does he mean, that something is lacking in the afflictions of Christ? Clearly, he does not mean that something was lacking in the atoning work of Jesus; that the suffering of the cross was not sufficient to settle the question of sin. The fact is, the word "afflictions" is never used in the scriptures to describe the death of Jesus. Afflictions are what Jesus went through before the cross from the opposition of the enemy, the devil, and from our Lord's willingness to make himself a servant to others and to minister to human needs. That was when he endured "afflictions."

But there is nothing lacking in what he did on the cross. Scripture says, "He is able to save to the uttermost all those who come unto God through him." John adds, "He is the propitiation for our sin, and not for ours only

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 are opposed by the lusts of the flesh and face the subtle lies and deceptions of the world around us, then we find we are engaged in a combat, and combat is always costly! Someone must pay a price in order that others might come to Christ.

Have you ever asked yourself, how many prayers and tears, how much heartache and disappointment has someone gone through for you in order that you might come to Christ? I never read the Scriptures without a momentary thought, at least, of what it cost others for me to have this Bible in my hand: the blood of martyrs, the fears and tears of persecuted people throughout centuries, the sweat and labor of translators, and the effort of teachers to make it plain and clear. We should never read the Scriptures without remembering that someone has died to make it possible.

When we come to Christ we are to take up this battle and suffer on behalf of others. It not only benefits others but it benefits us as well. That is why Paul says, "I rejoice in my sufferings on your behalf." "It does something for me," he says. "It keeps me usable. I am reminded constantly that it is out of weakness that I am made strong." That is what suffering for others will do for us: it will keep us humble and useful. But it also has great effect upon others: it shows them that we are deeply concerned. We pray for them, we long for them, we grieve over them, we hurt when they hurt. That is the process by which others come to Christ.

Finally, this process requires, as Paul goes on to say, an understanding of a truly great mystery:

"...the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him [not simply Christ, but "Christ in you"] counseling and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ [that is the goal which in v. 22 he says God is aiming at]. To this end I labor, struggling with all the energy he so powerfully works in me."

There is the great mystery. It is the greatest truth taught in the Bible, and yet it is the most seriously missing element in many churches today. Most Christians in our churches understand that Christ died for the forgiveness of their sins---they believed that and came to Christ because of that---but that is where most of them stop. Relatively few, it seems, ever go on to grasp the fact that Jesus died for them that he might live in them. It is his life in them that is the source of power, change and deliverance, and the ability to resist temptation. That is how loneliness is met and Companionship provided. It is not enough to know that Christ died in order that we might go to heaven. We are also to know, understand, and practice Christ actually living in us now!

That is surely the most astounding truth in the Bible. As Paul declares here, it is a mystery that "has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to his saints." Think of that! Nowhere in the Old Testament will you ever find a single verse that describes the process by which God is going to help his people. There are great promises in the Old Testament, such as Isaiah's word at the end of chapter 40, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." That is true. Old Testament saints understood and believed that promise, and they actually experienced it: they waited on the Lord, and they were strengthened; they were lifted up, comforted and helped. All that is clear as you read the Old Testament. But what was never told them was the means by which God would do this.

It was not until Jesus came and taught his disciples that we learn at last what means God would employ. In Matthew 13, that amazing chapter of the parables of Jesus, our Lord took these words on his own lips, quoting one of the Old Testament prophets, "I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world." Gradually he sought to impart to the disciples this amazing truth: through his death and resurrection, and through the coming of the Holy Spirit, they would be indwelt by Jesus himself. In the Upper Room, just before the cross, he uttered these words, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home in him." Dr. Robert Munger's great little

booklet, "My Heart, Christ's Home," is a magnificent development of this statement. It is the mystery hidden from the foundation of the world, but now made known to his saints.

Paul himself lived this way. That is what he is telling us in the last verse of this chapter: "To this end I labor, striving with all the energy he [Jesus] so powerfully works in me." There is a new power at work. When you understand that you possess the Lord Jesus---that he is in you---you have a totally new source of power. You also have a new desire, a new motive: you long to see change take place and you are motivated to take the steps that will bring it into being---to obey, to read, to study, to learn, to grow. You have a new Companion along the way. The problem of loneliness is ended because you are never alone when Jesus is present in your life. What a mighty truth this is! It is what delivers people. It is more than the fact that Jesus died on a cross. He died that he might live in us! This is the highest truth of all, a truth that God labors for us to understand and apply. When it happens, things begin to change in any human life.

Our long-time friend, Major Ian Thomas, used to put it very succinctly. He is a former British Army officer, and has made it his lifelong ministry to travel all over the world and teach this wonderful truth of "Christ in you, the hope of glory." He puts it this way:

He had to be what he was, in order to do what he did!

We have been seeing that in Colossians. Jesus had to be both God and man in order to die in our place, be raised again, ascend into the heavens, and send the Holy Spirit, and thus come into our life. Second,

He had to do what he did, in order that we might have what he is.

We could never have this new power, this new source of energy, this new comfort and strength in our life, if Jesus had not done what he did. It is on the basis of his death and resurrection that we have what he is. Third,

we must have what he is, in order to be what he was.

That is what this great text is saying. God wants to present us "holy, without blemish, and free from accusation," just as his Son was. We are being conformed to the image of his Son. He is "bringing many sons to glory." We must have what he is in order to be what he was. That is why it is important to understand this great mystery, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

The world knows nothing of this mystery. You will never find it mentioned by the media, except by Christians. You will never learn about it in the great universities of the world. In all secular wisdom and knowledge there is no recognition of this incomparable source of change in a human life. It is found only in the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why this message is such a powerful, world transforming, revolutionary statement, and why we ought to give ourselves to understanding it more than any other thing in life.

Let me summarize this passage, in closing. The apostle points out three stages of change. First, the new birth begins a process which is intended to perfect us, spirit, soul and body. To advance that process requires pain and commitment on the part of others on our behalf; and when we come to Christ we are to undertake that same pain and commitment on behalf of others. Finally, all progress occurs only by coming to understand and to practice the mystery of "Christ in you, the hope of glory." That is how to stop the terrible downward slide of any human life!

There may be some who have come to this service and have never yet begun that process. If so, I want you to know that this transaction can take place between you and God alone right here. In a moment of quietness, as we close this service, you can say, "Lord Jesus, here I am. Come into my heart. Receive me. Begin to change me." He will respond, as he promises to do, to those who in true faith invite him into their lives.

Prayer

"Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything

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."

Catalog No 4023
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 this week an article entitled "The Most Boring People of 1986." Some may place me in that category, but at least I was not 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 Westheimer, who, as this article says, "debunked the cherished myth that talking about sex is always interesting." The winner this year was Joan Rivers. "Her rival talk show," the article says, "reveals the genius of Johnny Carson."

Whether we agree or not with this article, it does point out one of the major problems of life---boredom! I would not be at all surprised to learn that most of the toys that were opened at Christmas have become boring now and are lying neglected. Even fathers have tired of playing with them! Have you ever asked yourself, what is boredom? Why do people grow bored? I believe boredom comes as a result of looking to something outside yourself to keep you excited. We blame our boredom on everything else. "There's nothing to do," is a frequent complaint of children, as though it were somebody else's fault. But boredom is really our problem. There is something wrong in us. There is no inner resource from which we can draw. Boredom comes when we find ourselves demanding satisfaction from some instrument or activity, or even some person, outside ourselves. It indicates there is a real lack within us.

The letter to the Colossians is actually dealing with the problem of boredom, of apathy, and lack of vitality. Life had no zest, no zing and delight for these Colossian Christians. That is why the apostle Paul seeks in this letter to reveal the true secret of a turned-on life: it is the discovery of a Person who can live within us. As we have already seen, that is the great mystery, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Christians who have discovered this---not merely in an intellectual sense, but have begun to live on that basis day by day---are very seldom bored. To them, everything is exciting. Even difficulties and trials are regarded as adventures and they look forward to how the Lord will work them out. They may feel a sense of risk, perhaps even danger, but they also have a sense of excitement and anticipation as they look for God to act.

This is why the Scriptures often refer to the word "riches." Paul frequently makes mention of the "riches of the gospel." In one place he says his greatest joy was to declare "the unsearchable riches of Christ." The gospels make frequent mention of "treasures." Jesus talked about "laying up treasures in heaven." We have within our bodies, Paul says in Second Corinthians, "a treasure in earthen vessels, that it may be evident that the power is not from us but from God." That inner treasure is what makes the Christian life rich, zestful, and worth living. So these letters of Paul seek always to create a sense of this in people, to help them understand that the answer to the problem of boredom and apathy is a "well of living water," as Jesus put it, "springing up from within." That is what will refresh our spirits, and save us from perpetual boredom.

Hear these words of Paul from the opening verses of the second chapter:

"I want you to know how strenuously I am exerting myself for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in

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

The apostle's purpose for writing is stated very clearly there. He specifically wants to enrich their lives, 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 1 from the closing verse of chapter 1. These two verses actually belong together. In verse 29 of chapter 1, Paul says, "To 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 and toil he was putting into this matter of bringing the Colossian Christians into vitality, excitement, and a sense of 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 continuously in prayer 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 right things to help someone, but if his attitude is wrong nothing you do will serve to assist him. What can change that? It is your praying for him! Prayer can change the heart and mind, the inner attitude. It is a powerful force to transform an atmosphere and make something acceptable when otherwise it would appear to be dull and uninteresting. Paul prayed ("agonized" is the word) for these Colossian Christians over and over again, even though he had not personally met most of them. Also, it is evident from his letters that he was alert to every word of information about them. When Epaphras brought news to the apostle in Rome about the church at Colossae, Paul questioned him and extracted from him all the information he could in order that he might 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 effortlessly, although he had a marvelous mind and was capable of tremendous spontaneous statements of truth. The letters reveal that much thought had gone into them. When did he have time to think? I have always felt that he worked through these deep theological statements on occasions when he was unable to sleep at night. I find 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. Oftentimes I am able to work through a whole message and outline it in those night hours. Then I go back to sleep and usually sleep peacefully till dawn. Perhaps Paul found his chain made sleep difficult and he used the 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 straighten 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 go about helping 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 demonstrates here.

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 others 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 living. It gives you the sense that you are not alone, that you don't have to handle your problems by yourself, or that you don't have to lean heavily on human advice, though God often provides help in that way. The main thing is, are you reckoning upon the wisdom of your Lord? He put you in a certain situation and he will work it out 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 seemingly 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 tried that 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 calmer, and not 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 things, 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 hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ by being misled by false teaching. In these verses we have 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, and one begins to focus upon that, rather than the truth. That is one of the favorite weapons of the devil. To be deceived is to think you know that something is right, but it is really wrong. Truth and error look almost the same, but one is a counterfeit. In these days when we have so many counterfeit and imitation things around we are used to being deceived and do not feel alarmed about it any more. Plastic looks like metal. Flowers are made of silk. We are daily touching things that are but imitations of the real thing. But imitations have obvious 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 for a world-wide shift in consciousness from war to peace, in 1987. That sounds admirable, and many thousands 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 of God dwelling in me." Then the two words are added, "as me." That is, I myself am the Spirit of God. And finally, there comes the not particularly original blasphemy, "In truth, I am the Christ of God." Such prayers seem good on the surface. They appear to offer freedom---they may deliver for awhile---but soon there comes

decreasing pleasure, increasing bondage and, ultimately, disaster and death. This is the progress of evil. That 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 bored, empty, and despairing.

This is also true of personal ambition, the lust for power, love of fame, and pride of race or position. All these things are like narcotics. We run after them and we are encouraged by the world to do so. But they are substitutes, counterfeits of the real thing. What Paul desires is that all may discover the real life. This struggle is, in essence, a struggle between two gods: the great god, Self, and the true God of man, Jesus. We hear much today of self-realization, self-actualization, self-development, self-discovery, self-esteem, and self-love. Self is really a disguised god! It sounds right to us. We do not want to hate ourselves. Yet there is a "self" that is very wrong. In the next section of this letter the apostle will tell us what it is, and what God has done about it in order that we might be able to enjoy the true freedom that is found only in following and serving Jesus.

Recently I attended a seminar in Chicago featuring Dr. John White, who has written a number of very helpful books on family life. The seminar was on sexual deviations. Dr. White made it very personal by pointing out that sexual sin always offers a new sense of freedom. But it is an illusion. It seems to offer more, but if you try it you will find that you have gained nothing. Dr. White put it very strongly: "I have found," he said, "that when I give up the illusion of freedom, I then am free to discover the true freedom that is in Jesus Christ." That is the secret of zest and excitement in living. The answer to boredom is to reject the cheap imitation so you can discover the exciting God whom we serve.

There is a note of encouragement here in these words. Paul says there are two things about the Colossians that delight him and encourage him to believe that it will be difficult to deceive them by the false teaching in their midst. Here are his words:

"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."

Two things help against being deceived: first, a well ordered, disciplined life. The spirit of our age says, do whatever you feel like doing, respond to whatever you like. Deny yourself nothing. Paul, however, delights that the Colossians are orderly and disciplined. They make themselves do right whether they feel like doing it or not. A disciplined life will always be hard to deceive. Gordon McDonald's book, *Ordering Your Private World*, is helpful in assisting many to discipline their lives in right and proper ways to discover the freedom of disciplined living. I have always wanted to be able to play the piano, or some musical instrument. I envy people who are able to sit at a piano and play it, seemingly without effort. But I cannot do that, because I have never disciplined myself to study and practice music. Thus, I have no freedom in this area. Almost any discipline will help us resist error and Paul compliments the Colossians on their orderly life, for it makes them resistant to deceit.

Second, the apostle delights to see how firm is their faith in Christ. They understood clearly that it was Christ who held them, not they who held Christ. When they strayed, he would send someone to them to point it out to them, or stop them by some circumstance that would make it difficult for error to take root among them. A strong faith in the presence of Jesus is a powerful bulwark against being misled.

Paul closes with an admonition which I consider to be one of the greatest passages in the New Testament:

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

I would urge you to memorize those verses. Here is a guide to an exciting, zestful life: "Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him." Obey him, follow him, converse with him, draw upon his grace, lean on him, look to him for comfort. That is how to "continue to live in him."

Three things have happened to you, says Paul. You have been "rooted" in Christ. (These are all passive participles, meaning these things have been done to you.) Like a deeply-rooted tree, you have been planted in

Christ and those strong roots will hold you. Secondly, you have been "built up" in him. Not only are the roots 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 thankful in everything? That means you do not grumble, complain and criticize. You cannot have it both ways. To be 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. Afterwards 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." 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 I 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 often find you are listening to a man talking to himself. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why are thou so 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? Look beyond what has occurred and realize it could have been much worse. Then discover all the things which 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 will have discovered the answer to boredom!

Catalog No. 4024
Colossians 2 :1-7
Sixth Message
January 1, 1987

BEWARE!

by Ray C. Stedman

Our text today deals with the terrible danger of being spiritually deceived. We live in an age that is well supplied with impersonators, pitch men and con artists. I once heard of a farmer whose horses kept slobbering over everything. He saw an advertisement in a farm magazine offering a cure for this for a fee of \$20. He scraped together the money and wrote asking for the secret. In return he received a very thin envelope containing a single sheet of paper, on which were written the words, "Teach your horses to spit."

We laugh at that kind of simple-minded deceit, but what is happening to many people today is not funny at all. I had lunch last week with a prominent Christian businessman who told me that his son, who had been raised as a Christian and had gone to church all his life, is now involved in a cult here in the Bay Area, headed by a guru who claims to open minds to divine powers. A highly intelligent and well educated man, he has fallen for that and has dedicated his life to propagating the error of that cultic group. This is not an uncommon experience. Some of you, perhaps, have loved ones who are involved in cults. In view of the present danger there may be no passage in the Bible that is more relevant to our own time than this second chapter of Colossians.

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, whom he 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 bring this up to date, we would say they were in danger of being taken hostage! That is something we hear much 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 facing Christians who are taken captive by wrong philosophy, wrong teaching, false doctrine. Such can deprive 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 means 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, but what the apostle has in mind here, of course, is the danger the Colossians are facing of being seduced by bad philosophy.

What was wrong with the philosophy that endangered them? First, says the apostle, it was "hollow." It was empty teaching. When they got to the heart of the teaching he is referring to they would discover that it had no real content, no actual basis in reality. That is true in every age. Many of the philosophies we hear of today when compared with the reality of human existence are far off the mark. They are without content. They are sheer illusion.

But, and here is their second characteristic, they can "deceive" many. They are deceitful and misleading. They may sound good, they may be followed widely, but they are mental detours, leading many astray. When you examine them closely you discover they are empty and exploitative. Communism---and capitalism, too---are philosophies, and both have elements of non-reality about them. John Kenneth Galbraith describes the difference between them thus: "Under capitalism, man exploits man; under communism, it is exactly the reverse!" Both are somewhat wrong. Neither reflects truth in its ultimate form.

The apostle goes on to point out the three things that are always characteristic of wrong philosophy. They were true of the specific philosophy that was endangering the Colossians (we will look at that in much more detail in our next study), but they are equally true of erroneous doctrine in any age or generation. Here, then, are the three things to watch for.

First, according to Paul, these empty, deceptive philosophies "depend on human tradition." They arise out of the thinking of men, find a foothold in society, and then are passed along from generation to generation so as to appear popular and widely supported. Hardly anyone dares question them because everybody believes them. One obvious example today is the theory of evolution. Evolution is now being widely challenged on a scientific level. Many evolutionists are beginning to question Darwin's view. But when I was in college the theory of evolution was almost universally accepted. Nobody with any scientific standing ever raised questions about it. But evolution is only a philosophy, not a fact. Today it is being challenged by the counter-philosophy of creation, which is not a religious view at all, but a scientifically supported view that offers another explanation of the universe and all material things in it. The theory of evolution rests upon human tradition and derives its longevity from widespread popular support. That is why it is difficult to answer.

Our staff received recently a remarkable newspaper account of a debate between David Roper, one of our former pastors, and another religious teacher, actually a liberal pastor, Bill Edelen, of Boise, Idaho. Each of these men writes a religious column, from widely separated viewpoints, on alternate Saturdays for the Boise Statesman, a daily newspaper published in Boise. The editors were so interested in their divergent opinions that they brought the two men face to face to interview them. It was a most remarkable encounter. In his

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

The book that I'm reading right now is *Jesus in History and Jesus in Mythology*. And 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, 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 scholarship are convinced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Christianity is a myth, and that it is only a tiny minority 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? In every 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, who have no basis in scholarship for what they believe. I do not have time to share with you David's answer to that charge, but I assure you it was very adequate. By the end of the debate the reporter was obviously on his side. But what a confirmation of what the apostle says. "Hollow and deceptive philosophy" rests on human traditions. 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 depends on "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 in a row," a series of things. The word became associated with the alphabet because letters in an alphabet are always lined up in a row. One learns a language by first learning the ABC's. Thus, some scholars feel that this word 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 lined up in a row, in ranks, as in a hierarchy. These scholars feel that this is a reference to the fallen angels; that it is 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 world's darkness." In Galatians he calls them "weak and beggarly elements" and clearly states the Galatians are serving "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. Oftentimes, when a scriptural phrase has a double meaning, both meanings are intended. Perhaps that is true here. These philosophies that Paul describes (or any erroneous philosophy in the realm of religion or the spirit), fits the description of what Paul calls in 2 Timothy "doctrines of demons." They are elementary, rudimentary truths, 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 we say, 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 the midst 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 the 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 talk that way? Of course you have. It is rudimentary, elementary, childish conduct. Children love to dominate others, to order them around and tell them what to do. Grownups love to do that too. Children easily squabble and fight among themselves. But watch a crowd of people arguing over some difference of opinion: the arms race, higher wages, or whatever; note how easily it degenerates into a squalid squabble!

All of this is a representation of what the apostle is describing: it is childish behavior. Nations and governments often act this way. International affairs are conducted on this basis. When we are removed from it we can see how childish and foolish it is. The apostle reveals that this behavior is inspired by "world rulers of this present darkness...wicked spirits in high places." There is no other explanation for the evil of humanity that is in accordance with reality. Yet that explanation is often regarded as ridiculous and laughable. Christians, and others who hold it, are often intimidated and do not want to admit that they believe in such things as "wicked spirits in high places." But everywhere in the Bible, from the lips of Jesus himself and from the pens of the apostles, this is the clear teaching of the Bible. The reason why some of the great schools and universities, which started out Christian, soon lost their Christian emphasis, is because people began to give heed to the traditions of men, based upon basic, rudimentary principles of life, that are constantly fed into the stream of human thinking from demonic beings who control the minds of men. That is the biblical position.

But there is yet a third problem with false doctrine. It is, in Paul's words, "not according to Christ." Evil teaching always focuses on demoting Jesus, refusing to recognize the full revelation of his Being as it is set out in the Scriptures. Every cult attacks the Person or the work of Jesus---or both. They claim that he was nothing but a very good man, a model man, perhaps, although he lacked the insights into life and reality that are ours through modern knowledge. Thus, they put him down and demote him. Or, going to the opposite extreme, they regard Jesus as a supernatural being, one among several Divine Masters who come periodically into human affairs to teach us wonderful truths that we would never know otherwise, and which, if followed, will release within us great divine powers. (This is the teaching of the New Age movement that we are being exposed to today.) But these cults never view Jesus as God himself, willing to die in our place.

Any form of religious error, then, will have these three manifestations: they are supported by human tradition; they establish themselves as the only respectable doctrine to believe; and yet they come from the minds of satanic beings who cleverly, but invisibly, reduce people to childish behavior and childish attitudes, all to the end of setting aside the glory and true character of Jesus Christ.

Now Paul begins his response to this, and his answer is not along the lines we would ordinarily think. When confronted with evil teaching, most of us attack it and try to point out what is wrong with it. But the apostle does not do that. When I was a young preacher, just graduated from Dallas Seminary, I decided to take on all the cults in Palo Alto. We were meeting at the Community Center then, and we put an advertisement in the local paper announcing a series of three evening meetings to deal successively with Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Science. We actually invited the adherents of these cults to come to the meetings and

debate with us. I will never forget the tension, the dynamism of those meetings. People could hardly wait until the preliminaries were over and we started the message. I had done my homework and studied these cults. I quoted them and answered their claims with quotes from the Bible, and tried to show their error. Then we 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 the other side because I made them look like underdogs. Everyone felt sorry for them, and people ended up supporting 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 Colossian Christians what they already have in Jesus. He calls them back to the truth and sets it vividly before them in 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 against 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." All of 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 receive Jesus. What more do you need? That is Paul's question. What more can these false teachers add to that? What 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 heart; that is a lifelong process. We shall always be growing in appreciation of what it means to have him, but the point is (and it is a very important one): you do not need anything more than you already have. You merely 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 can be added, Paul now traces how this happened to them. In these next four statements he tells how believers share 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 Christian baptism has taken the place of the Old Testament rite of circumcision. But if you look carefully at this verse 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 may hear from time to time confirm that. It is not strange, really, that it should be so because it reflects an inherent, even instinctive understanding, that in some sense the male sex organ stands for the man himself. God has 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 being is covered over; but it is there. What that is is expressed by the Spanish word "macho." Macho stands for proud confidence in one's own ability; it means self-centered egoism. That is what we have become in the fall. (The

man, of course, stands for the whole race, male and female alike.) The male foreskin is a picture God has employed to teach us that egoism, the sinful pride within us, is hidden to us. We do not see anything wrong with it. But when a male is circumcised, it is a symbolic way of saying that what is hidden is now revealed. The wrongness of it is exposed so we can see it for what it really is. Fallen humanity is revealed for what it really is.

Thus when our Lord was crucified, the sin that he assumed on our behalf was removed---that is the point. It is what Scripture calls the "circumcision of the heart." Observe how Paul explains that here: "In him you were circumcised in the putting off of your sinful nature." The foreskin of the flesh is a symbol of the fallen nature, the flesh, within us. When we become a Christian it is revealed for what it truly is, worthless in God's sight! It does not advance us or help us in any way in his sight. To be proud and independent and sinfully selfish will never help us or find value in God's sight. That is why Scripture says plainly, "They that are in the flesh cannot please God." Jesus himself said, "Without me, you can do nothing." The natural life, the old Adamic nature, is of no value any more.

Then Paul moves to the next step, which is baptism. In baptism, he declares, you were:

"...buried with him and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead, and when you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive in Christ."

That is what baptism means. Circumcision symbolizes the death of Jesus and our death with him, our dying to sin, as Romans 5 and 6 argues. But baptism stands for our new life with him. When someone is immersed in the waters of baptism he is not left there, he is brought out again to a new life. That is what baptism reflects: the work of the Spirit in imparting new life from Christ, a new humanity, the human spirit made alive. It is the difference between a true Christian and a merely professing Christian. The true Christian has been made alive in Christ. He has a whole new basis for living.

The third step in this process of sharing in Christ is given next.

"He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to his cross."

Here Paul declares the forgiveness of sins for which the law, the "written code with its regulations," condemned us. That condemnation is now removed by the death of Christ on our behalf. He paid for all our sins, the sins we committed in the past, the sins we are going to commit to day, and the sins we shall commit in the future. Sin is no longer an issue in our relationship with God. It affects our fellowship but not our relationship. He has fully dealt with it. We need to acknowledge our sin in order to enter into the benefit of that forgiveness, but forgiveness is already there in the heart of God. What a wonderful truth! I do not think I rejoice in anything more than the fact that my sins, my mistakes, my failures, my unloving words, my unkind attitudes and my selfish actions have been forgiven. Every day God gives me a new slate, a new unspoiled day, to live through by his grace. Our sins have been forgiven. Paul sees them as "nailed to the cross," so they no longer can condemn us. The law is not done away with, but the condemnation of it is. We are made free and told "Go, and sin no more." The last step is, we are freed from the power of these evil beings: Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

These are the world rulers of darkness, the clever, malevolent, malignant beings who keep inserting into human thinking wrong ideas, dangerous thoughts, attitudes and teachings that set us at naught with one another, and make us go for one another's throat, keeping enmity and strife stirring in the human family. What has happened to them? Paul declares that when Jesus died he seized these powers by the throat, chained them, and dragged them in triumph behind him, like a Roman general marching through the streets of Rome, his chained captives walking behind in total subjugation. That is why John can say "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." There is no need, therefore, to give way to evil teaching or evil temptations, for we have a Power and a Person within who is superior to anything Satan can throw against us---the world, the flesh or the devil! That is the teaching of this passage. Paul is encouraging the Colossians to see that there is absolutely no need to believe the doctrines, the teachings or the rituals that he will next enunciate to them.

Neither do we need to believe them! If we understand who we are in Christ, and what we have in him, there is no need to be weak, faltering, or failing. We may rise up and be the men and women that God intended us to be. Let us pray the words of the great hymn:

Out of unrest and arrogant pride, Jesus we come.
Into Thy blessed will to abide, Jesus we come to thee. Out of ourselves to dwell in Thy love,
Out of despair to raptures above,
Upward we rise on wings like a dove,
Jesus we come to Thee.

Catalog No. 4025
Colossians 2:8-15
Seventh Message
January 11, 1987

THE THINGS THAT CAN RUIN YOUR FAITH

by Ray C. Stedman

I should like to read to you the introduction to Colossians in the Student Bible, a new and exciting version whose notes are written by our good friends, Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford:

You see them in strange outfits on street corners, chanting phrases with too many vowels and punctuating the chants with a noisy tambourine. Or in airports, thrusting books or flowers into your face. Or in California, all over California. You think of them as crazy cults populated by misfits. Then one day you hear about a friend of yours. She seemed normal until suddenly, without warning, she snapped. Her parents searched desperately, even hiring private detectives to help get her back. They found her surrounded by allies, with a new name, a new hairstyle and, so it seemed, a new brain. She stared at them with clear eyes and told them they were missing out on the most wonderful experience of life. She had joined a cult. Cults come in all varieties, often with exotic names like Hare Krishna or Urantia, or the Church of Scientology. They demand much from their members: a lifetime of discipline and absolute loyalty, and they also promise much in return: the pathway to a secret, hidden knowledge, available only to those who follow them.

Here in this ancient city of Colossae, almost two thousand years ago, the same attack was being made upon Christian faith as we find in our country today. In this passage, beginning in verse 16 of chapter 2, we will discover the dangerous traps that await us on every side as we journey toward the goal of a personal relationship and ultimate union with God. We learn there are no new heresies. It is beyond the mind of man to invent new error. We find the same error, the same things that can derail the spiritual life, repeated cyclically through the centuries. These early Christians faced a hodge-podge of spiritual error, a mish-mash of philosophy and misleading ideas, some from Jewish backgrounds, some from Gentile, some arising from pagan superstitions and some from the teachings of the Far East. We, too, face this same kind of mixture of wrong ideas in our world today.

Here, then, are the things that can hurt believers. The first one the apostle takes up is what we shall call Empty Ritualism.

"Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Food restrictions, special diets, observance of special ceremonies and days obviously arose out of Jewish practices. God gave them many of these ceremonies in the Old Testament as shadows, pictures. The problem was that people were performing these rituals mechanically, simply going through the motions. That, Paul 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," of course, came every week.

We find a parallel to these observances today whenever people place a special value on religious performance. It has not been very long since the Catholic church relented on its restriction against eating meat on Fridays. That was an example of a diet restriction, designed to impart a religious value to life. Many Protestants give up 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 our neighborhood why she kept a kosher kitchen she replied, "I don't know. It is just part of our religion." It was 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 because they were taught that Sunday was a carry-over of the Jewish Sabbath and that it was wrong to work or travel 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 kind of religious performance that is done without meaning or personal significance falls into the category Paul is describing.

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 things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ." Once the reality has been realized, shadows are of no value whatsoever. Shadows are pictures, given in advance, designed to prepare us for something. But if you have found Christ, you do not need the shadows any more. Paul even includes the Sabbath day as an example.

I carry with me pictures of my wife, my children and my grandchildren. I take them along in order to be ready for 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 talked to them and tried to relate to them? You would think I had lost my mind---and I probably would have. But, 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 relationship 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! He is 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 of refuge to run to when we are troubled or uncertain about life. To lose him is to lose all source of excitement and vitality in life. That is the danger in observing shadows. That is why this paragraph begins with the word "therefore." The previous section pointed out all that Christ is to us now. Thus Paul is saying, "Having him, therefore, 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 a Sunday morning. If you merely mouth the words of the hymns when you sing, you are doing this very thing. You are destroying something, entering into a religious mechanical performance that not only says nothing to God but destroys something in you. If you let your mind wander when someone is praying, if you do not follow along and silently say, "Amen," or let that prayer reflect what you are thinking, you will turn off much of truth 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 reflect interest in what I am saying. But I know from sad experience that that is not always true. Some of you are at home, 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 would be interesting to know at the end of a service where everybody has been! We all find our attention straying 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 fooled by that kind of performance? What a low view of God, to think that if we run through some religious fol-de-rol he is going to be pleased with us! There must be a dozen passages in the Old Testament where God tells us what he thinks of that kind of thing. I do not have time to read them to you, but let me share one verse 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 I cannot endure any longer."

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

My second question is: do you have any idea of what you lose by this kind of a performance? The thing that first 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 piety by 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 again to 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---all of life becomes dull and empty. Tenseness, worry, guilt and loneliness begin to harry your footsteps. Eventually you succumb to the need for something to stimulate you. You fall in with the world's futile search for an anesthetic 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. Mysticism is 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."

The key characteristics here are "false humility and worship of angels." Those are two invariable elements of false teaching in this context. In Colossae there was an ancient teaching (later called "gnosticism," meaning knowledge) which held that there is a hierarchy of angels between all human beings and God which must be placated and acknowledged, and that one's knowledge, which began in virtual ignorance, increased with such contact until at last one entered into the fullness of understanding of the Oneness of all things.

That ancient heresy appears widely today under the name of the New Age Movement. At the heart of it is this claim to seek the true Oneness of things. We are told that we are all part of the universe of created matter, and that we are united in Oneness with God. The claim is that this is the way to escape from being centered in oneself, and so move into the fullness of knowledge of the universe. That is why Paul refers to it here as a "false humility." It claims to move you beyond self, but in actual practice, if you examine teachings like this, you discover that they focus on self; that the real goal is to develop all your self powers. That is why it is called the human potential movement---the idea that everything is already there inside of you, and all you need to do

is bring it out and develop your possibilities and full potential. I saw a motto on a wall that said, "The Light 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, etc. By the way, most of these are California groups, I must sadly admit. All of them are designed to help discover the great potential that is supposedly wrapped up in you. Whitney Houston sings, "To love yourself is the greatest 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 whole world of occult manifestations. Those of you who saw Shirley MacLaine's minidrama on television got a full dose 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 has been 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 himself has provided us, by which we have immediate and continual access to the fullness of deity in Christ, and by him, strength, help and comfort along our way. Such error will effectively remove all opportunity for the continued 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. They are on a quest for a will-o'-the-wisp, that seems to be further away from them the longer they pursue it. Such pursuit effectively removes one from experiencing the prize that God has in mind for his own: daily fellowship with a loving, living Lord!

I find the phrase "such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen," is a strange translation. The Revised Standard and the New American Standard Versions both agree that this should be translated, "taking his stand on visions." The New Age Movement makes a great deal of visions, of psychic experiences with spirit beings, of taking trips outside the body and seeing things that others cannot see, and thus being gradually introduced into strange teachings and ideas. We all remember the claim made by Oral Roberts that he had seen 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 Christian truth. But who are these strange creatures that are seen in these visions? According to the Bible they are fallen angels, otherwise known as demons, often masquerading as people who once lived on the earth. Thus, they give some degree of credence to the teaching of reincarnation, which is widespread in our day.

With this seeing of visions the apostle links an incredible conceit that claims divine honors for oneself. Notice how he puts it: "his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions." Erich Fromm, whose writings were 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 our own 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 someone 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? 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!

If you claim to be God yourself you do not have anyone above you to look up to; you can only look down on everybody else. That is the danger and the folly of this kind of thing. A modern proverb answers it well. "There are two things one should never forget: 1. There is

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 has lost contact with his Head! He also loses connection with the whole body, which is the church. He is no longer fed 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 use, homosexuality or sexual promiscuity, etc., repeated continually bring an end to emotional maturity. Those 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 at the level at which they began their habit. That is the terrible danger of this kind of thing. Mysticism, a compulsive 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 God himself 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 closing 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 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 and seeks to please God by extreme forms of self-denial. Dedication and discipline are a proper part of the 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, well-ordered lives. But you can make a god of discipline. You can take perverse delight in making yourself do 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 he 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 negative approaches: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" I grew up in Christian evangelical churches that taught there were certain things that Christians must always avoid, and if you observed these taboos you not only were 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 to God, is wrong. Christianity is a positive faith. If you want to know what pleases God, read the last twelve 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 other people 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 understand your death with Christ. "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world [or, as we saw earlier, "to the elemental spirits of the universe"], why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?"

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

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. A legalist looks at life and says, "Everything is wrong unless you can prove by the Bible that it is right. Therefore, we must have nothing to do with anything that the Bible does not say is right." That reduces life to a very narrow range of activity. But the biblical Christian looks at life and says, "Everything is right! God has given us a 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 promiscuity is wrong. Lying and stealing are wrong. These things are never right. But there is so much that is left open to us. If we are willing to obey God in the areas that he designates as harmful and dangerous, then we have the rest of life to enter into in company with a Savior who loves us, and who guides and guards us in our walk 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." That is why Jesus took the Pharisees to task: "You observe these minute rituals, but inwardly you are tombs, filled 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. People may 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 Christ, 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 vitality and vigor of your Christian walk. Life becomes dull and often desperate. Many Christians discover this has happened to them. What they need to do is to return to Jesus. When these things take over even here in this place, return to Him. We must take care that every day we are in touch with our loving Lord and walking 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 will find the freedom we seek.

If you would like some additional insight on the New Age Movement, which is so prevalent in our area today, 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 deprive the 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 the

secret of fulfilled human potential. It is sad to see these ideas being propagated by celebrity evangelists who are 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 "be all that you 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 of encouragement. One thing he said struck me forcibly. He declared the symbol of a Christian life ought to be "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 section 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 in living life.

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 resource, an invisible reality, which the world does not have and cannot see. This is not referring to Christ being "up in heaven," lost in space somewhere! Rather, this refers to what Paul has talked about earlier in this letter, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." This extra dimension is not far removed in the reaches of space; it is right within the heart, an untouchable, invisible dimension within us. This is the glory of the Christian life and the secret of its power, joy and courage. If you have not discovered this yet as a Christian you have not yet begun to live as you can and should. This is what puts a smile on a Christian's face, even though he or she is in trouble.

"Set your hearts" on this hidden resource, is Paul's exhortation. He means our affections. Think with affectionate gratitude of what the Lord Jesus has already done for you and what he is to you now. This is not a form of escapism. It is not something you try to keep your mind on all day long, to the exclusion of business, family or home. It is rather something that when your mind is occupied with your family, work problems, 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 better 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 really 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 of how to 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 at work producing it---it has begun within us---but it is invisible to the world around. One of these days the curtain will be lifted for as Paul puts it beautifully in Romans 8, the whole universe is "standing on tiptoe, craning its neck, waiting 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 more 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 once 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 two simple steps, repeated over and over again. It is not a complicated thing. In the same way, the Christian life is

a matter of taking two steps, one step after another. Then you are beginning to walk. Those two steps follow in this passage. Paul describes them as, "Put off the old man," and "put on the new." Then repeat them. That is all. Keep walking through every day like that. That is how Scripture exhorts us to live. Today we will look 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" and "put on." The first exhortation is always put off. If you are going to put on something, of course, you must first put off what you have got on. If a mother tells her ragged and dirty little boy, "Go upstairs and put on some clean clothes," he knows that the first step is to take off the ragged and dirty clothes. He will get his ears boxed if 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 were wrong. We have allowed ourselves to take on attitudes and actions that are definitely destructive and have been 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 powers. 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 pleasure and power. When it overflows its proper banks it becomes destructive and, ultimately, disastrous. All that is 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. They mean 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 would all be 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 with men), by visual things. Pornography clearly falls under this classification. Anything that is sexually arousing: literature, movies, whatever, is to be denied. It belongs to the old life. It is beyond the boundaries of God's river and becomes a very destructive thing.

"Evil desires" is closely associated with lust---it is mental uncleanness. It is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he said, "If a man looks after a woman and lusts after her in his heart (if he mentally plays over the picture of having sexual union with her), he has already committed adultery in his heart."

Lastly, we are to put off "greed, which is idolatry." When this word "greed," or "covetousness" appears in Scripture without being linked with idolatry, it is referring, of course, to avarice, to lusting after money and the things that money can buy. But in this particular context, linked with this word, "idolatry," it is greed to possess another person's body. That, says Paul, is idolatry---a powerful longing to lay hands on some other person and possess his or her body. It is what is called "falling in love," or what the world calls "having an affair," in which you allow another person to become so dominant in your thinking that he or she takes the place of God to you. Listen to the words of some of the love songs that are popular today: "You're all I need," "I can't live without you," "Help me make it through the night." All these expressions are saying, "You are like God to me. I am looking to you to fulfill the deepest longings and yearnings of my heart." Anyone who has lived very long knows that such is an impossible demand. No human can fill that need. Those who mistakenly feel that a new affair, a new love relationship, is going to meet all the hungers of their life find

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 wrong that 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. But 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 first chapter of Romans gives a vivid description of what God does in such a case. He removes the restraints within society against evil and lets it have its way, allowing it to produce what evil always produces---death in the midst of life. Romans 6 says, "the wages of sin is death." We all suddenly find ourselves facing a flood of evil practices. The restraints that once kept evil under bonds and within bounds, are lifted, and evil practices flood 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 fabric of society is destroyed. It is easy to see that this is right where we are today. Historically, it is always a prelude to the break-up of government and the overthrow of the forces for law and order within society. This is how the Roman Empire, and many other empires in history, fell apart. These are moral absolutes which men never can 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 quite able to react to evil, and he does react. He allows it to have its head. He removes angelic restraints upon this 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 alike, 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 when individuals indulge themselves in this way God takes away the restraints upon evil and all of society is widely 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 great 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." That is very plain and clear.

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

he says, 'put aside all these things,' and what the law says? Isn't this putting us back under law?" Not at all. There is a big difference. When the law says, "You must not commit adultery," or, "You must not covet your neighbor's wife," it is saying to humanity in general, "You must stop even though you cannot stop. Inwardly you will fail, if not outwardly." That is what Jesus refers to in the Sermon on the Mount. The law addresses 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. Therefore, 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 now 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, therefore we can act differently. That is the appeal of the grace of God. You have "taken off your old self." Paul described 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 himself. You have "put on the new self," which is growing and increasing in knowledge. The more you learn about this new life the more you will find you are able to say no to the old. It is increasing in knowledge, growing into 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 the Scripture, there is nothing wrong with anger itself. Here, it is an expression of anger that is in view, what one commentator accurately calls "impetuous name-calling or calculated insult." As believers, we must not do that any more. Jesus referred to this in the Sermon on the Mount. "If you call your brother 'Raca,' or 'you 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 word or deed, 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 and should 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 sued for that 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 Christians might resort to in a time of sudden pain or hurt. You all know the temptation to do this, but it is to be put away because it is not you any more. I find many Christians are confused as to just when they are being hypocritical.

Nobody, of course, wants to be a hypocrite. But many Christians think they are being a hypocrite when they know that inwardly they have evil temptations but nevertheless they go to church and sing the hymns, etc. What the Bible says, however, is that a Christian is a hypocrite when he gives way to those wrong things. 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 agree with the little boy who was asked what a lie was and replied, "A lie is an abomination to the Lord, but a very 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 displayed 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, which, of course, it is. There is a parallel verse to it in Galatians, one that is widely quoted, which includes also 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 is saying 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." This is the kind of thing Paul describes. There is no longer to be any of that for you are no longer what you once were. Someone else says, "I'm Italian. That is why I lust. All Italians are hot-blooded." Or, "I'm stingy, but I'm Scotch." Or, "I'm blunt, but our whole family is that way." No, says Paul, we no longer can retreat to that kind of excuse for we are no longer what we were born to be. All such background of class, national origin, training, education, whatever it may be, is all set aside because you are now linked to Christ. "Christ is in 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 to learn that the One who goes with us is able to take us through. We are to "look unto Jesus." That is the exhortation everywhere in Scripture. He will take us through the present trial and make it into a blessing. "Your sorrow," 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."

Catalog No. 4027
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 went 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, beginning 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 in terms of putting off and putting on clothes. That suggests that this ought to be done every morning. As God's chosen people we ought to put on daily these qualities that reflect the character of Jesus. Each of these terms 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 a cup of coffee to get them going. It is reported that Albert Einstein once said, "The problem with the speed of light is, 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 started, however, Paul's word is, "clothe yourselves." When you get up, deliberately put on these qualities of life. 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 never 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 in every one of us. Reject that! Put it off! Do as Paul says in the previous paragraph: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature." Treat it as though you are dead to it. That is Paul's argument in Romans 6: "Consider yourselves to be dead, indeed, unto sin." And you can, because God has given you a new basis of 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 life. These men make a strong and biblical plea to do this. But the problem with their message, and the reason why 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 to be put away. There is a negative quality of living, which precedes the positive. We must reject this appeal which comes to us so easily from our past experience. It still haunts us as new creations in Christ, because it has 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 to be what God has now made us to be. So, when you start your day, begin this way. Put away the old reactions and then clothe yourself, put on deliberately, in your thinking, these seven qualities that reflect the life and temperament of Jesus.

The first one is "compassion." "Clothe yourselves with compassion." Literally the word is, "bowels of sympathy." The ancients believed that the emotions originated in the bowels. We don't think that way, although we get close to it when we say, "I've got a gut feeling." I recently heard the story of the little girl who was asked to describe the parts of man. She said, "Man has three parts: the brainium, the chester, and the abominable cavity. The brainium holds the brain, the chester holds the heart, and the abominable cavity holds the bowels, of which there are five: a, e, i, o and u." Many seem to be as confused about their humanity as that little girl. We must understand what these phrases mean. Compassion is what we would call a "heart of pity." It is a sense of sympathy, of empathy with someone. When you come to the breakfast table, come with compassion: compassion for that strange looking creature, her hair up in curlers, shuffling around the kitchen in old slippers. Come with compassion for that gruff, stubble-faced fellow, isolated behind his morning newspaper, ignoring everybody; or those children who are trying to get everything together before they go to school. Approach life with compassion; that is what Paul is saying. Put it on when you get up in the morning. 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, action that arises out of a sense of sympathy. It can take many different forms---a smile, a kind word, a pat on the shoulder, an invitation to lunch, an offer of help. We are to put on compassion and kindness as we start our 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 with the wrong crowd. He lived a wild and dissolute life, becoming involved in many hurtful things which almost destroyed him. But he heard a preacher one day and though he did not particularly appreciate his preaching, he was struck by the man. He went to hear him again, and soon that preacher was able to lead him to Christ. That young man has become famous as the great St Augustine. This is what Augustine wrote of Ambrose, pastor of the cathedral in Milan: "I began to love him, not at first as a teacher of the truth, which I despaired of finding in the church, but as a fellow creature who was kind to me." What an open door kindness can be!

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

The fourth quality is "gentleness," a familiar word that is oftentimes translated "meekness." Not weakness, meekness! I like the definition that says meekness is "strength under control." It is real strength, but it does not have to display itself or show off how strong it is. This is what our Lord beautifully displayed. He described himself as "meek and lowly in heart." The first curriculum of the Holy Spirit is that we must do what Jesus said, "take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart." That is what we are to learn as we go on. Here is another excellent definition of meekness: "a willingness to waive one's rights for a good cause." Set aside your rights! Do not demand that you be satisfied, but, for the sake of a good cause be 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 conduct without flying into a rage. It is a negative term. It is holding back, restraining yourself from becoming upset or speaking sharply or shrilly to somebody by our mate, your child, whoever whose conduct you find difficult 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 to restrain 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 whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." What a beautiful thing it is to find forgiveness in a Christian's heart! It does not mean that we are not to air a grievance we may feel. We are told in Scripture that if we have something against another to "go to the other and tell him his or her fault

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, forget it. Forgive it. Put it away. No longer let yourself think about it. Our model, of course, is Christ's treatment of us. That is what he did when we came to him. He forgave the unkind thoughts, the blasphemous attitudes, the grievous, 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 not to bring up 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. Some marriages stumble greatly at this point because the partners not only get hysterical, they get historical! They go 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 to face reminders 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 from time to 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! Even in your private thoughts you never allow the offense to come up and to color your attitude toward the one you have 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 to put 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 the bond of love: "over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Someone has said 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 old person you once were. You have put that aside already. Treat the past as though you were dead to it, and be now what 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 elect ourselves into the kingdom of God. Jesus said once to his disciples, "You have not chosen me but I chose 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 and 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 literally says, "God's elect"), he does not mean that the church has replaced Israel. Israel is also "God's chosen people," but on a different level and for a different purpose. The promises to Israel are material: they deal with a land and a kingdom on the earth. We believe that the dreams of the prophets, so beautifully expressed by Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and others, will be fulfilled in a coming day, which Paul describes in chapter 11 of Romans. God yet 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 of reality 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 never found in Scripture. It is an unbiblical concept. But we are chosen, and we are "holy." Here is a word that means to be separate and distinct. We are intended to be different. Christians are to live differently than the world around lives. We do not run after the crowd and follow its fashions and value systems. We are expected to be different

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 should God love us the way he does? To be such people as we are and still be loved by him is one of the amazing 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 to peace. 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 come together 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 to this. 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 man in the black suit who stands behind the catcher rules on the plays and makes the calls. He remains absolutely unruffled no matter what happens. Managers curse him and kick dirt at him, fans throw pop bottles at him, yet he remains unperturbed. That is the idea here: let the calmness of Christ rule among you. Consider Jesus 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 in its functioning.

I was in another city recently, meeting with Christians who were divided into two factions. What they were discussing were questions of turf, of who had the right to do such and such a thing. The spokesman of 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 be worked out and the meeting ended in harmony. Everybody understood one another. That is what Paul is urging here. "Let the peace of Christ rule in your midst," because that is what we are called to do. His serenity may possess 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 to be 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 members of 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 beyond. 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 that 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 for even a 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 among you richly." The Word is to be well known among us. It is to be the central thing in teaching us how to live. This

amazing Book, this insight into true life, is unrivaled anywhere in the world. There is nothing else that even 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 gather about the Word. We ought to thoroughly know and understand this book. Here are described marvelous mysteries which challenge the greatest minds among us. Here are simple statements that burst like rockets in our brain 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 dispels 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 old Hawaiians said to me, "You know, the Hawaiians never had any music until the missionaries came. All the pagans do is chant. They do not know how or what to sing." The first songs the Hawaiians ever sang were 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 greatest 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 what God has done. With this is linked "spiritual songs," testimony songs which reflect, again, how God has led us. If you look through any hymn book you will find these three types of songs include. We sing one of these praise songs earlier, "Joyful, Joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love." Some of the great teaching 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 today depressed and discouraged, but as the congregation lifted up one of these great hymns you were lifted by it as well. You began to rejoice again in spirit because the music and the words reminded you of the greatness 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.

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"---that means the whole of life is to be related to the Lordship of Jesus. Everything in life, every activity can become an act of worship. Even routine things can be offered to Christ; done "in the name of the Lord," motivated by our relationship to him. Ruth Graham had for years a sign over her kitchen sink that said, "Divine services held here three times a day." Washing the dishes can be an act of worship if you do it in the name of the Lord, as unto him.

What a difference of motivation this makes to a Christian! You do things you do not like because you offer them willingly to the Lord as a sweet sacrifice to him. If you love someone you will do things for his or her sake that you do not particularly like doing. That is the point here. There are things that money could never pay us to do, but love will motivate us to them. If we love the Lord we offer to him the activities of our day; we do everything with a view to his glory. Fill out your income tax forms with that in mind! Meet with your boss, or your employees, "in the name of the Lord Jesus." Buy your groceries in the name of the Lord. Do your homework in the name of the Lord Jesus. Thus, you are laboring, not for the world or its benefits, but for Christ. What a glorious picture this gives of the whole of life under the Lordship of Christ.

In the next section Paul will expand this to various relationships of life. Here, meanwhile, is his marvelous

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.

Catalog No. 4028
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 lusts and desires of the flesh, fulfilling the urges that arise from within. But men and women are given a new basis to live on when they come to Christ. The glory of the gospel is that we have been given a new life, therefore 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 blood, sweat and tears of living. Here he deals with our relationships, highlighting and examining what to put off 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 word

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 cancel out equality. 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." 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 delighted in it. It was voluntary on his part. In no way did he regard it as a threat to the equality which he knew existed between himself and the Father. Therefore, to submit to someone does not mean you are not equal. 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 proper 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 hooked his arm around a pole holding a street sign. We were talking about something that the team wanted Ron to do but which he did not want to do, and he was sounding off about his feelings on the matter. As he talked, I looked up and read the sign which was over his head and immediately broke into laughter. Then he looked up 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!). 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 "fitting." It 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 great quality of this word is that it stresses the need to support. This podium in front of me is useful in that the flat section on top supports hymn books, etc. But notice that the useful part is supported and held up by a column underneath. Without that support the rest of the stand, including the useful portion of it, would be useless. So, if the wife does not support and hold up her husband, honor him, and thus recognize his leadership role, there is chaos in the home. One of the reasons we are having so many problems in society today is that this 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 expected 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 his 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." Without voluntary submission on her part the word is useless. Submission cannot be demanded. The Father did not demand it of the Son. It is a voluntary submission which wives are exhorted to make because it is fitting and 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 key to the husband's role in marriage is contained in Paul's words, "Love your wife." He must give himself to that. Note it does not say, "Make love!" Although sex plays a very important role in marriage, and properly so, it 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, not only 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, bitter,

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 if you do that with your wife you will cut her deeply, far more than you may realize. So, put off these traits of criticism and sarcasm. They are from the old life. As Christian husbands you do not have to act that way any more. If a husband says something sharp to his wife it is very difficult for her to give him the support which the Lord asks of her. I heard of a man who once said to his wife, "You're nothing but a rag, a bone, and a hank of 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.

The third word here is addressed directly to children. I am grateful for that. It shows that in these early church meetings whole families were present. Earlier this morning we dismissed our children, so you parents must carry Paul's word to them.

"Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord."

The word "obey" comes from Greek words which mean "to hear under someone." Thus, children are exhorted to listen to their parents, recognizing that they are over them and have authority in their lives. Again, the theme of authority is present. Parents should point out to their children that they can please the God of glory by their willing obedience to them. Why is that pleasing to God? Because it preserves peace in the home, for one thing. Disobedient children are always a cause of strife and difficulty. Further, because it teaches respect for all authority. God knows that this is an immensely important part of life and ought to be taught to children as they are growing up. To teach your children to obey is extremely important. Remember how the book of Proverbs puts it. The Living Bible states it beautifully:

"Young man, obey your father and your mother. Tie their instructions around your finger so you won't forget. Take to heart all of their advice. Every day and all night long their counsel will lead you and save you from harm; when you wake up in the morning, let their instructions guide you into the new day. For their advice is a beam of light directed into the dark corners of your mind to warn you of danger and to give you a good life."

Next, the apostle gives us the other side of the coin in words addressed to fathers:

"Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."

The word for "embitter" is from the word "to stir up, arouse, or irritate." That does not mean that parents are never to say or do anything that makes their children feel irritated. Discipline can often irritate a child. We must not seek to avoid every instance of that. But this word is given in the present continuous tense. Thus, it is really saying, "Fathers, do not keep on irritating your children. Don't keep hammering away at it, nagging them, or they will become discouraged." This is an important lesson for fathers. One of my grandsons was a bit sullen the other day when I was correcting him about something. When I asked him why he was acting that way he said, "Because you're always accusing me." That gave me pause. I did not realize it looked like that to him. I did not think I was always accusing him---I am sure I was not---but to him it looked that way. I realized I had better change and approach things differently. That is what this word to fathers is about.

I have discovered through long experience that there are three things which fathers do that are particularly irritating to children. The first is to ignore them. A father who has no time for his child soon creates in him a deep-seated resentment. The child may not know how to articulate or explain the problem, but he feels unimportant and worthless. A second source of irritation is to indulge your children, giving them everything they want. That soon will make them restless and dissatisfied. Children long for guidance and direction; for intimacy, not for superficial indulgence. Such indulgence will frequently create a deep-seated, sometimes lifelong feeling of resentment. Insulting them, calling them names and putting them down, is also a source of resentment in children. They will become discouraged and be put off from the things of God. I once heard of a father who was in the military and who would line up his children every morning and give them orders. Once as he was giving them their orders for the day he asked, "Any questions?" His son put up his hand and asked, "How do you get out of this outfit?" Many a child sooner or later will be asking the same question if their

fathers do not obey the word of the apostle, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become 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 addresses a word to slaves.

"Slaves, obey your masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and 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 not masters instructed to free their slaves? The answer is that conditions were not at all ripe for that. Several 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 results in freedom. There must first be a change of atmosphere that will allow for this. That is why this word exhorts slaves to personally control themselves and obey their masters. Not, as many were tempted to do, obey outwardly, with a heart of resentment, but with genuine service, as unto the Lord. Years ago, a missionary to Africa told me that he was responsible for getting the nationals in his area to do certain jobs. He discovered 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 his eye was irritating him he took it out and put it on a stump. When he returned he found that everybody was still working because the "eye," as they thought, was watching them all the while he was away. That is what the apostle means here: eye-service! Working only when the boss is watching. This man thought he had found a great way to free himself, until one day he returned to discover that one of the workers had sneaked around from 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 yourself to work for somebody you are, in a sense, selling yourself as a slave for the hours involved. Employers cannot 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 men, since we know 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. It is the Lord Christ we are serving. Every employee ought to write that down and put it somewhere where he can see it during working hours. "It is the Lord Christ I am serving." Do not ever work for anyone else, as a believer. Work 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 out of gratitude and love to the Lord. Love, of course, is the greatest driving force in life. What a change this will make in your job!

But, more than that, as the apostle suggests, there is a reward, or a lack of reward, involved. Here he is surely making reference to what the Scriptures call "the judgment seat of Christ," the great time of appraisal when every believer will stand before the Lord who will give his judgment as to what he has been doing in life. All that you and I have been doing will pass before our eyes and we will know whether it has been done "as unto 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 garments 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 is given

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 the opportunity for service and you will be given a less valuable or satisfying realm of labor in the eternal life. All this is being settled now. That is why Jesus could say, "He that is faithful in little shall be given authority over much." 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 to be done in light of the Great Appraisal which is yet to come, when hearts will be revealed. Here is revealed God's concern for justice and fairness. One of the commentators suggests that perhaps in those days of slavery masters were being gently exhorted here to provide means by which slaves could build up a financial fund whereby they could eventually buy their freedom. Thus, in time, conditions and attitudes toward slavery 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 in Christ 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 do you live today, in a world given over to false values, with much conflict, shame, and degrading practices? How should we then live? Here are Paul's words:

"Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God 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." That brings to mind 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 others, and 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 away our peace, or restricts our love, changing us and making us dull and shallow in our reactions. When you sense 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 is in prison, limited, in chains, and he is asking that God will set him free to proclaim this magnificent message, "the mystery of Christ." Earlier in this letter we learned what that is: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." That 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 indeed a revolutionary, even a dangerous movement. The church is a dangerous body of people. Turned loose in this world the church will challenge many things that are going on around us. And it ought to do so. We will find 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 had attended where both Christians and non-Christians were present. One man opened the class in prayer, and while he was praying, Dick, like many of us at times do, was saying a quiet "Amen, amen," to what the man prayed. The next morning the man said to him, "I was very grateful to have you at the class last night. But when I was praying I kept hearing you say, 'Amen.' Have you considered what the non-Christians present

thought of that? They are not used to that kind of thing. They must have thought you were a fanatic. They probably felt uncomfortable." Dick Halverson had the grace to say, "I appreciate that man. I'm glad he pointed that out to me." In the early days when we had a number of large evangelistic home Bible studies, one of the problems we faced was from Christians, reflecting a self-righteous attitude, who raised questions that made others feel uncomfortable. That is terribly wrong. Here Paul reminds us to be sensitive and wise in the way we act, but to make the most of every opportunity. Because the days are evil, opportunities for witness abound 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 may make people mad, finally, but the way we say it is very important. Here the apostle takes note of this. "Saltiness" 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 here. It means conversation that is flavored with attractive ideas so that listeners are stimulated, their curiosity aroused.

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 descends 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 or 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 of life, putting off the old ways and putting on our new life, with Jesus in our hearts, living gracious, sensitive, but salty lives!

Catalog No. 4029
Colossians 3:18-4:6
Eleventh Message
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 there is another church building, called "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints." Mormons believe that the Scripture has been so garbled in translation through the centuries that it has lost all authenticity, so that God 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, then, 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. A close look will reveal characteristics of life in the early church and what they thought to be important. The first theme is that of the importance of discipleship. In verses 7-9, mention is made of two of the disciples whom Paul took 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 in Rome to the church in Colossae. They may not have realized what a treasure they were carrying, or how momentous this 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 continual, 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 one or 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 Macedonia to accompany the apostle when he took to Jerusalem the special offering that had been collected for the poor and needy saints there. Later, Paul sent him to Ephesus to take Timothy's place in that city, and possibly also, 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 a 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 worked with 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 virtue of a Christian at work is faithfulness. In the letter to the Corinthians, the apostle writes that God has called us to be stewards of the mysteries of Christ. He goes on to say, "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful." That is what God values more than anything else. He does not ask us to be popular, or brilliant, or widely 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 that quality of 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 believers one with another has always puzzled me. There is no hierarchy in the early church. That has been imposed upon 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 of 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 personal equality. As a result he gained their respect and their voluntary submission to his desires. Perhaps one of the most striking phrases uttered by Jesus is given in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew, where our Lord says 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 apparently took some of his master's money with him when he left. Somehow he found his way to Rome and came in contact 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 is being sent back to Colossae to be a minister among the slaves who probably made up half the congregations of these early day churches. By this means the gospel penetrated all classes of society. Jesus himself said that his task as living Lord was to place people where he wanted them to be. "You have not chosen me," he said to his disciples, "I chose you and I appointed you [the word means, 'I strategically placed you'] so that you may bear fruit in my name."

Along with Onesimus, the forgiven slave, another name; given in verse 10, highlights the Christian virtue of reconciliation.

"My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him)."

That reference to Mark takes us back to the first missionary journey of Paul, recorded in the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Acts, when the apostle, together with Barnabas, was sent out from the church at Antioch. They took with them a young man named John Mark (who is referred to in Acts 13 as John). We know from other references that John Mark was the son of a wealthy widow who lived in Jerusalem. He was probably a little spoiled, so that when things got tough on the journey with Paul and Barnabas Mark wanted to go home to mama. And that was what he did, abandoning the work. Later, when Barnabas wanted to take him on the second missionary journey, Paul resisted and refused to allow a quitter to go along. Barnabas instead took Mark to Cyprus, where they ministered there.

What a wonderful thing it is to find that now, years later, Mark is with Paul in Rome. Somehow he has won his way back into the apostle's good graces. It may well be that by this time he had finished the Gospel according to Mark, which he wrote under the tutelage of the apostle Peter, with whom he had ministered for many years. Now Paul sends him to Colossae with this affectionate word of appreciation, and instructions that he should be welcomed there. What a reminder this is that we are dealing with the God of the Second Chance! Some may have muffed things badly in a ministry, or failed in some area of life. Oftentimes in the world, no second chance is offered, but the God of grace offers a second and even a third and fourth chance. How beautiful to see Mark receive another chance. and to meet now with the apostle's approval!

Aristarchus and Mark are linked in verse 11 with another name.

"Jesus, who is called Justus, also sends greetings. These are the only Jews among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have proved a comfort to me."

Here are three Hebrew Christians---Mark, Aristarchus, and Jesus, who is called Justus---whom Paul says were a comfort to him. Reading between the lines here we see a reminder of Paul's consciousness that he too was raised a Jew. This takes us back to Romans 9 and 10, where the apostle writes of his love for Israel, saying he has "great sorrow and unceasing anguish" in his heart because of his fellow Israelites, that they may be saved. What a comfort it must have been to him, bound as he was by a chain and unable to go about the city, to have three young Hebrew Christians to carry the ministry to the Jews on his behalf.

Aristarchus, who came from Thessalonica, probably became a Christian under Paul's ministry in that city and later joined the apostle's party when he was sent as a prisoner from Caesarea to Rome. Here Paul refers to him as a "fellow prisoner," which suggests that he had been charged by the Jews with some crime and was actually awaiting trial along with the apostle. With them is Jesus, called Justus, another evangelist among the Jews. He took the Roman name Justus because he wanted to gain acceptance in the Roman Empire. Many young Jewish converts did this. Paul himself changed his name from Saul when he was converted. These men, therefore, would have been the first "Jews for Jesus" contingent who went abroad to minister on behalf of the Savior!

A section on the theme of faithful prayer and intercession brings before us the names of Epaphras, Dr. Luke,

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 began 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 also had a pastor's heart. He labored in teaching and in prayer to bring these Colossian Christians to maturity. We do not know how he got to Rome. He may have gone there to get apostolic instruction on how to deal with this terribly subtle and powerful false teaching that had surfaced in Colossae (of which we see a counterpart in the New Age movement today).

It is interesting to remember that in the letter to Philemon, Epaphras is called a "fellow prisoner" of the apostle. That may indicate that he too was arrested by the Romans when he came to visit Paul and was chained as well 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 Reader's Digest article I read the other day about a military commander who was giving instructions to a group of raw 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 tonight?" 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 others.

You too may be separated from loved ones who need spiritual help. What can you do? You can pray for them. Prayer is a marvelous provision to release spiritual power into an individual's life, to remove obstacles, and open doors. It may take a long time, so prayer must be persevering. My wife and I recently have had the joy of seeing God open doors for someone close to us for whom we have been praying for many years. Finally, this 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, the apostle's last letter, Paul writes, "Only Luke is with me." All the others had left, but Luke remained faithful to the end. To this beloved, faithful brother we owe both the gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. Only eternity will reveal the enormous debt the church owes to Luke for his faithful labors to the end.

By contrast, the name Demas is mentioned here without comment in a kind of eloquent silence. He too was from Thessalonica and probably was part of that original band of Asian interns who traveled with Paul. Evidently he labored well for awhile for Paul seems to have taken him to several places. But now, when Paul is in prison and all his associates are in danger of being arrested themselves, it is apparent that Demas is beginning to drift. Paul says nothing good or bad about him at this point, but later, in his letter to Timothy, he writes, "Demas has forsaken me having loved this present age, and has gone back to Thessalonica." This young man has become famous (or infamous) in Christian history as the one close associate of Paul who would not hang in with him. He left because he loved the attractions of the world and abandoned his faith as a result.

The theme of home churches is introduced in verses 15 and 16.

"Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea."

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 masculine 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 Davis, 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 here. His 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" which came to them. Thus they read and studied these letters; analyzed and applied them. This reading formed a great 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 going on among them. It must have occasioned many long hours of discussion!

We do not, of course, have a letter "to the church at Laodicea" in our New Testament. Many scholars feel that the letter to the Ephesians is this letter to Laodicea, as the Ephesian letter was, in a sense, a round-robin letter. The first and last of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation are Ephesus and Laodicea respectively, so that the letter to the Ephesians, as we call it, was sent first to Ephesus, then to the other churches on that circuit, and finally ended up at Laodicea. If that is the case then we have not lost anything in that regard.

Paul now sends a message to an individual in the church.

Tell Archippus: "See to it that you complete the work [or, the ministry] you have received in the Lord."

In the letter to Philemon we learn that Archippus was most likely the son of Philemon. He had a certain ministry given to him which he was neglecting, so Paul reminds him to "complete the work." No one knows what that ministry was, but the important thing was that he had a ministry, as do all Christians! Here again is a greatly neglected aspect of the church today. We have been taught for so long, unfortunately, that when we come to church the "ministers" are those who stand up in front and lead the meeting. But that was not the case in the early churches. The ministers are the coaches; the players are those in the pews. They are the ones who have "the work of the ministry." Paul says in the letter to the Laodiceans (or Ephesians) that leaders are to "equip the saints to do the work of the ministry." I hope by now that many of you have caught this truth. The impact of this church on our community is not going to be made by what we say here so much as it is by what you do when you leave here. You are the ministers. You are the ones responsible to carry on "the work." The church does not meet to worship and to learn, period. We meet to worship and to learn in order that we may prepare each believer for his or her ministry. That is what Paul is doing here. He is stirring up this young man to take on the work that God had given him to do. This is a very important truth, one which the devil resists strongly because it is so powerful. When individual Christians begin to recognize that God can and will work through them, they begin to sense new excitement and challenge. Christian life is no longer boring and routine. It becomes demanding and exciting.

There are great models in this congregation of those who have taken on personal ministries. Some of these ministries have grown into institutions that have carried on the work. Last week we saw a very effective ministry undertaken by Marge Kuder, a woman in our congregation who works at Stanford University. She learned that Student Health Services at Stanford planned on handing out condoms to the students in response to the AIDS crisis. The media gathered on White Plaza to report what was happening. Marge seized the opportunity and distributed some broadsides prepared by Jews for Jesus which described the three kinds of love. This opened up opportunities for personal and sensitive interaction with individuals. The media saw her and took note of what she was doing. She was interviewed on two television stations and one radio station and was invited to serve on a panel to represent the Christian view of sexuality. God can use even the media for his work if somebody is faithful to the ministry which he has given! Marge had a great opportunity to speak, not with condemnation or with strident charges, but with caring concern, and point out that though distributing

condoms may be well intentioned, it conveys a false sense of sexuality. She was able to contrast that with the intention of the Almighty in designing this marvelous force we call sex, and describing what it can do in bringing someone to a sense of fulfillment and enjoyment within the framework of marriage.

How do we discover these ministries which God has given? We find them by responding to a need that is right at our doorstep. You do not have to look for a ministry, it is usually right in front of you---on the bus, in your carpool, with your neighbor next door. Respond to a need. Speak to some lonely person. Open up your home to someone who is homeless. Do a kind deed to some widow on your block who needs help. Have a cup of coffee with somebody. That is how you find the ministry which is given by the Lord himself. If you follow it up you will soon discover that you have an exciting door of opportunity opened to you. Perhaps others can join in with you, and life becomes for all a tremendous adventure of faith. That is what the apostle is talking about here in this letter. That is how the church spread through these three cities and began to affect that whole section of the Roman Empire.

Paul closes with this word in verse 18, when he takes the pen in his own hand:

"I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. [How much would you give for that autograph today?] Remember my chains. Grace be with you."

That word, "Remember my chains," was written two thousand years ago to people who have long since gone.

Paul himself has been in glory all these centuries, and yet these words still have meaning for us. It is well for us too to remember his chains, to think of this mighty apostle who was hounded, persecuted and oppressed everywhere he went. He was resisted and thrown into jail in many places. He spent a night and a day in the deep. He was beaten with rods and stoned on occasion. Even as he writes these letters he does not find it easy to do so. He does not sit down in a comfortable room with his word processor. He must dictate them to an educated slave, and then painfully, because he suffered from poor eyesight, write with large letters his name at the close, lest the letter be treated as a forgery. Down through the centuries this letter, along with others, has transformed the history of the world. It is a tremendously important document. Yet it is well for us to remember the cost of having these scriptures in our own hands. "Remember my chains." Let us give thanks for this apostle who kept the Lord always at the center of his thoughts. Heedless of obstacles, he fulfilled his own ministry faithfully before the Lord. What a model he is to us!

Thank You, Father, for Your magnificence in nature.
Thank You, Father, for the inner promptings of Your Spirit.
Thank You, Father, for fresh truth to live by.
Thank You, Father, for people whose lives illustrate Your word.
Thank You, Father, for this church to which I belong,
for those who help me,
intercede for me,
support me,
love me,
inspire me.

Lord, I cannot live as a Christian without them,
for I need that part of Yourself
that You have placed within them.
And they cannot live without me,
because they need the gifts
that You have deposited in me.
Lord, free us of the selfishness,
the self-centeredness, the ego-trips,
the independence of spirit
that keeps us from binding ourselves into one.
Lord, help us to think first of those things
which will benefit others

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

Catalog No. 4030
Colossians 4:7-18
Twelfth Message
February 22, 1987

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