

Series: *Colossians: The Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ*

Lesson: *Christ's Sufficiency vs. Philosophy*

Text: Colossians 2:8–15 (L7)

Date: Sunday, February 26, 2012

*Colonial Hills
Baptist Church*

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TEACHING TIP

- Be sure that you are allowing the passage to teach and change you first. Without this personal penetration from God's Word, your lesson will not be as personalized or as passionate as it should. You will discover helpful principles and points of application as you personally meditate over the text's bearing on your own life, and such personal feeding will cause you to teach in the spirit of Acts 4:20—"We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." If we fail, as teachers, to personalize the text in this way to our own selves, we stand self-deceived in the warning of James 1:22 and may by example lead our students into the same error. While the content of your lesson is provided by God in His Word and its organization may also be provided for you by me, the impact of your lesson can powerfully be enhanced by the overflow of your own transformation. So, in summary, be sure you are teaching your lesson to yourself, first, and responding in submissive obedience to what you learn.

NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Colossians 2:16-23 – *The Sufficiency of Christ vs. Religiosity/Self-Effort*

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in Colossians 2:8, Paul gets to the heart of his message. He sits in his Romans prison, perhaps with Pastor Epaphras beside him, and he begins to confront the Colossian heresy that Epaphras has just told him about. He is burdened for these believers to continue in Christ, even as they first received Him (2:6-7), and such instruction is what they just needed more of in the face of persuasive false teaching. Since Christ is supreme and sufficient, they didn't need something else; they just needed a better recognition of what they already had in their relationship with Jesus Christ.

The first aspect of the Colossian heresy that Paul begins to address is philosophy. In this passage, Paul first offers a warning and then explains his reason for such a warning.

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

THE WARNING: BEWARE OF PHILOSOPHY (v. 8).

In verse 8, Paul warns against (lit.) “the philosophy.” While Paul seems to have had a specific philosophical system in mind, we’re left to guess at what that was. Paul will later suggest some of its aspects,¹ but let us simply understand that “philosophy” comes from two Greek words and means “to love [Gk. *phileo*] wisdom [Gk. *sophia*].” Therefore, philosophy is the pursuit of true wisdom, and it provides each of us with a worldview, which is defined as “a particular philosophy of life or conception of the world.”² In its broadest sense, philosophy seeks to provide answers to the big questions of life—Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?³—and then the application of those questions to life’s decisions. Finding answers to such questions is an important search, but not when that search is undertaken using the philosophy spoken of in this passage. Paul explains his warning against such “philosophy” by discussing three aspects of it.

1. *Its nature*

In what appears to be an appositional⁴ or explanatory phrase,⁵ Paul describes this particular philosophy as “empty deception.” The word “empty,” when used literally, simply means “containing nothing” (cf. Mark 12:3); when it’s used figuratively, as it is here, it means “devoid of value, meaning, or ability; vain, meaningless, useless” (I Corinthians 15:14; James 2:20). Furthermore, this philosophy is deceptive, in that it is not based on and does not communicate truth. Therefore, it was a false teaching. The reason that this philosophy is evaluated as useless and deceptive is because of its source.

¹ “The specific heresy threatening the Colossians is unknown, in that Paul does not name it. We can, however, reconstruct some of its tenets from 2:8–23. It contained elements of philosophy (2:8–15), legalism (2:16–17), mysticism (2:18–19), and asceticism (2:20–23).... This heresy also had components that were early forms of Gnosticism, the belief that there was a transcendent kind of knowledge beyond Christian doctrine known only to elite initiates who had ascended to that level. Most damning, though, was its teaching that Jesus was neither God nor the source of all truth” (MacArthur, John. *Colossians*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1996. P. 96-97.).

² *New Oxford American Dictionary*.

³ “Historian Adolf Schlatter noted that ‘everything that had to do with theories about God and the world and the meaning of human life was called “philosophy” at that time, not only in pagan schools, but also in the Jewish schools of the Greek cities’ (*The Church in the New Testament Period* [reprint, London: SPCK, 1955], pp. 150–54, quoted in MacArthur, 99.).

⁴ “Apposition is a grammatical construction in which two elements, normally noun phrases, are placed side by side, with one element serving to define or modify the other. When this device is used, the two elements are said to be *in apposition*. For example, in the phrase ‘my friend Alice,’ the name ‘Alice’ is in apposition to ‘my friend’” (“Apposition” on *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. <http://bit.ly/wwujem>).

⁵ It could be translated, “... philosophy, even empty deception.”

2. *Its source*

Paul uses three phrases that all begin with the same Greek preposition to describe the source of this philosophical system. First, it is “according to the tradition of men,” meaning that this pursuit of knowledge is simply man’s own imagination and speculation, even though it may have become traditionally accepted.

Secondly, it is “according to the rudiments [elementary principles] of the world.” This term really serves to illustrate the error more than define it. Homer Kent explains the meaning of the word underlying “elementary principles”: “Basically it denotes that which belongs to a series, and was applied to such things as the syllables that make up a word, the elements that make up the cosmos, and the notes in a line of music.”⁶ MacArthur applies this meaning to the heresy: “Paul might be describing the false belief system of the Colossian errorists as rudimentary, too simplistic for mature spiritual adults [cf. Hebrews 5:12]. To accept their teaching would be to descend, to regress from the mature teaching of Scripture to the infantile teachings of an immature religion, based not on advanced thinking and wisdom but on silly and childish thoughts. To abandon biblical truth for empty philosophy is like returning to kindergarten after earning a doctorate.”⁷ This elementary error, then, is like being enamored with the alphabet, but never using it to put words and sentences together; being captivated by a note of music, without using it to create an orchestration; being infatuated with a shadow, without being aware of the person casting the shadow.

Galatians 4:3, 9 uses this same phrase—“elements of the world”—to refer to the Mosaic Law regulations that we have been freed from. These ceremonial observances were “‘of the world’ in the sense that they dealt with physical and material matters that were only temporary shadows of that reality provided in Christ (2:17).”⁸ Such teachings “were limited to the temporal world scene.”⁹

In summary, this manmade philosophy is teaching that is contrasted with the depth of understanding and wisdom found in Christ (cf. 2:2-3), and that is what Paul underlines by the final descriptive phrase: “rather than according to Christ.”

⁶ Kent, Homer A. Jr. *Treasures of Wisdom: Studies in Colossians and Philemon*, Revised Ed. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1987. Pp. 86-87.


⁷ Also: “This same phrase is also found in Galatians 4:3: ‘So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.’ There again, the element of immaturity is evident. Whether first-century Judaism, as in Galatians, or the false teaching threatening the Colossians, human religion is not advanced, erudite, higher, transcendent and lofty in its profundity. Rather, it is banal, elemental, and rudimentary. It does not convey any new and profound truths. And, fatally, at its core is an effort to achieve salvation by works” (MacArthur, pp. 100-101).

⁸ Kent, p. 87.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

3. *Its danger*

The danger of this philosophy is its ability to “spoil” people. The word, used only here in the New Testament, means “to carry off as booty” or “to take captive.” While this false teaching is “empty,” “deceptive,” “manmade,” and “elementary,” we also saw in verse 4 that it was “enticing” or persuasive. Some had fallen prey to its deception and were now its captive. This was a bondage that greatly concerned Paul (Galatians 4:9), and therefore he incessantly struggled to ground people in the truth (Colossians 2:1-4; cf. Acts 20:28-32).

 **Application:** How should we view false teaching? *With concern, for it is a serious matter; with contending, because truth vs. error is a fine line and at times difficult to discern (2:4—false teaching may be persuasive); with personal guarding, because error may be more appealing and it wants me as its captive.* How do we “beware” this kind of philosophy? *By listening as Bereans, comparing all teachers to the standard; by moving beyond the elementary things, even as some believers failed to do (Hebrews 5:12), thus opening themselves up for captivity to elementary things (Galatians 4:9); by grounding myself in Christ, who will keep me from such captivity (2:6-7); by knowing my own personal life philosophy from God’s Word—what I believe, why I believe it, and what that means for my daily living (cf. 2:2-3)...its often the absence of such a firm understanding of worldview that causes believers to be vulnerable to aberrant teachings.*

Transition: Paul dedicates only one verse to briefly and shallowly describing the heretical teachings confronting the Colossians. Clearly, his purpose was not to provide a running list of false teachings. Rather, starting in verse 8, “Paul gives here a model for dealing with heresy. He does not bitterly denounce the heresy by name. In fact, he does not even give it a name. Nor does he present in exhaustive detail what the heretics believed. He deals with the heresy by emphasizing those truths that refute its claims and similar claims by all other heresies no matter what their names.”¹⁰ **Illustration:** Bankers are taught to identify counterfeit money by becoming very well acquainted with authentic money. Likewise, Paul now begins simply to reveal and unravel counterfeit teaching by underlining truth, especially *the Truth*—Jesus Christ (cf. vv. 6-7).

THE REASON: CHRIST IS ENOUGH (vv. 9-15)

In the next two verses, Paul crystalizes what has become our study’s title: the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. This, again, is Paul’s answer to the destructive heresies in Colossae.

¹⁰ MacArthur, p. 97.

1. *Christ is supreme (v. 9).*

Paul argues that it would be quite foolish and unfortunate to be led away captive by these false teachers “for [or better, *because*; Gk. *hoti*] in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.” The word “dwelleth” carries the idea of residence, and its present tense demonstrates the permanence and continuation of that residence. “Godhead” doesn’t refer to the Trinity, but to the state of being divine.¹¹ 1:15-19 already clearly demonstrated Jesus’ divinity, and alluding back to that power, verse 10 states that Jesus is “head of all principality and power” (cf. 1:16-18). Jesus is God!

The word “fullness” (Gk. *pleroma*) was a term erroneously explained by the false teachers. MacArthur writes, “They believed the divine *pleroma* was divided in its expression among the various emanations. Each got a decreasing share as they descended the ladder from good to bad. Paul, however, insists that all the fullness of Deity, not a part of it, dwells in Christ.”¹²

“In bodily form” doesn’t deny Christ’s pre-existing or pre-incarnation deity, for that fact was already established in 1:15, 19; rather, it demonstrates that even after He added to Himself humanity, He was still fully God. When we look at Christ, we see the fullness of God in reality (cf. 1:15).

“Paul’s point is polemical against the idea that the fullness of God dwells anywhere else, as the Gnostics believed, except in Christ alone.”¹³ So, it would be foolish to turn from Christ to the captivating heresies, because the fullness of deity is residing forever in the complete God-man, Jesus Christ.

2. *Christ is sufficient (vv. 10-15).*

Building on that idea of “fullness,” Paul continues in verse 10, stating, “And ye are complete in Him.” The word “complete” is the verb form of “fullness” in verse 9 (Gk. *pleroo*) and could be translated “to be made full”—“and you have been made full in Him.” What an incredible reality—Christ possesses the fullness of God, and “in Him” believers possess that

¹¹ Not referring to the Trinity, but to the state of being divine: “the state of being god, divine character/nature, deity, divinity” (Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. P. 452.).

¹² MacArthur, p. 101. Also, “The fullness of deity was Paul’s way of stating that Jesus is every bit God. On the other hand, Paul avoided modalistic language. The fullness refers to the completeness of the divine nature, but it does not mean that Christ is all there is of God. In fact, the word for God chosen by Paul expresses deity, not divine nature. Jesus is every bit God but does not exhaust the dimensions of deity. Father and Spirit are equally divine” (Melick, Richard R. Vol. 32, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Electronic Ed., Logos Library System in *The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001. P. 255.).

¹³ Biblical Studies Press. *The NET Bible. First Edition*. Biblical Studies Press, 2006.

same fullness! Believers “partake of His fullness, and have no lack that ritual, angelic mediators, or other factors must supply.”¹⁴ This is a common New Testament teaching.

John 1:16—“Of His fullness have all we received, and grace [upon] grace.”

Ephesians 3:19—“To know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Ephesians 4:13—“Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

II Peter 1:3-4—“According as His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him that hath called us to glory and virtue; whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

In verse 10, this verb is in the perfect passive tense, the perfect expressing a completed work with continuing results, and the passive expressing a work done through our union with Christ (i.e., “in Him”). Jesus Christ alone is sufficient for salvation!¹⁵

The final phrase of this verse (i.e., Christ “is the head of all principality and power”) further serves to highlight Jesus’ sufficiency against the heretical teaching concerning the necessity of angelic mediators.

Application: Even at this point, we can pause to make application with MacArthur: “[1] Everyone has a choice, whether to follow human wisdom or to come to Christ. To follow human wisdom is to be kidnapped by the emissaries of Satan and his false system, which leaves a person spiritually incomplete. To come to Christ is to come to the One who alone offers completeness. [2] May those of us who have found Christ never doubt His sufficiency by turning aside to follow any human wisdom.”¹⁶ Christ is the source of spiritual fullness and satisfaction, spiritual meaning and purpose.

¹⁴ Kent, p. 90.

¹⁵ “Although this is an obvious play on words, it is equally obvious that Paul did not mean the Colossian Christians were elevated to the same stature as Jesus. Nor did he mean that any one Christian became deity. He rather picked up the generic use of the term to state that, just as Jesus was fully God, believers are fully complete in him. Nothing lacks in salvation. The understanding of salvation may grow, and the appropriation of the blessings of salvation may increase; but in Christ, they had all there was, the ‘fullness’ of salvation” (Melick, p. 256).

¹⁶ MacArthur, p. 103. He also provides the following **illustration**: “Healings were an essential element of our Lord’s earthly ministry. They established His messianic credentials, showed the tender compassion of God, and foreshadowed the millennial kingdom, when He will banish disease. Our Lord’s healings also illustrate an important principle about salvation. When Jesus healed someone, He made them completely

In the next 5 verses, Paul is going to magnify the sufficiency of Christ by highlighting three results of Christ’s work on our behalf.¹⁷

a. We’ve been delivered through our circumcision by Christ (v. 11).

In verse 11, Paul uses the Old Testament custom of circumcision to picture what Christ has done for those who are “in Him” (the first phrase of verse 11). Notice some details of this circumcision.

This is a “circumcision made without hands”; that is, it was a spiritual circumcision, or a “circumcision of the heart” (cf. Romans 2:29). Even the Old Testament taught that God ultimately wanted a spiritual circumcision for His people (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 6:10; 9:26; Ezekiel 44:7, 9).¹⁸ This spiritual circumcision, completed by Christ (i.e., “the circumcision of Christ”) is accomplished in all those

healthy. In Matthew 9:22 we read, ‘But Jesus turning and seeing her said, “Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well.” And at once the woman was made well.’ Matthew 15:28 records the healing of a Canaanite woman’s daughter: ‘Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed at once.’ When the centurion’s servants returned to the house, ‘they found the slave in good health’ (Luke 7:10). Jesus said to the multitude in the Temple, ‘If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath that the Law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on the Sabbath?’ (John 7:23). Our Lord’s healing ministry can be summarized in the words of Matthew 15:31: ‘The multitude marveled as they saw the dumb speaking, the crippled restored, and the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel.’ Just as Jesus made people completely well when He healed physically, so also does He provide complete salvation when He heals spiritually. That salvation does not need to be supplemented by false human philosophy or psychology, ritualism, mysticism, self-denial, or any other human work. In Christ we ‘have been made complete’ (Col. 2:10; cf. 2 Pet. 1:3). When a person comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ, ‘he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come’ (2 Cor. 5:17; cf. Gal. 6:15)” (Ibid., pp. 103-105).

¹⁷ This is similar to what Paul did in 1:20-22.

¹⁸ MacArthur relates a very helpful understanding of physical and spiritual circumcision: “Every Jewish boy was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth (Lev. 12:2-3). It was the sign that he belonged to the covenant nation (Gen. 17:10-14). Throughout Israel’s history there had been two schools of thought about circumcision. Some held that circumcision alone was enough to save, since it granted membership in the covenant nation. That view was wrong, since ‘they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel’ (Rom. 9:6). Membership in the covenant community did not guarantee individual salvation. Paul writes in Romans 2:25, 28, ‘For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.... For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.’ The second view recognized that circumcision was only the outward demonstration that man was born sinful and needed cleansing. The cutting away of the male foreskin on the reproductive organ was a graphic way to demonstrate that man needed cleansing at the deepest level of his being. No other part of the human anatomy so demonstrates that depth of sin, inasmuch as that is the part of man that produces life—and all that he produces is sinful. That is the biblical view.... The experience of Abraham illustrates the truth that circumcision does not save. Paul writes in Romans 4:11 that Abraham ‘received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.’ Abraham was not circumcised until many years after ‘he believed in the Lord; and [God] reckoned it to him as righteousness’ (Gen. 15:6). His circumcision was the outward sign of a heart already made righteous by faith” (Ibid., pp. 105-106).

who are “in Christ” in place of the physical rite. Vaughan notes, “In union with Christ, believers have true circumcision, that is, they have found in Him the reality symbolized by Mosaic circumcision.”¹⁹

The object of this circumcision is not a piece of flesh, but is the (lit.) “removal of the body of the flesh.” Similar thoughts are expressed in Paul’s other writings (cf. Romans 6-7; II Corinthians 5; Galatians 5), and many questions come to mind in this discussion: What is the flesh, and does it refer to the same thing in every passage? If the “body of the flesh” has been removed and the “old man” destroyed, why do I still struggle with sin? Let us simply start in Colossians and consider how these believers would have understood Paul’s teaching in verse 11.

First, the word “removal” occurs in its verb form in 2:15 and 3:9, but no where else in the New Testament. It simply means “removal or stripping off,”²⁰ and suggests a definitiveness or permanence to such action (i.e., a casting away). Whatever has been “removed” in this verse has been done so in a complete sense.

Second, the phrase “the body of the flesh” has been variously understood, due to the possibility of interpreting both “body” and “flesh” either physically or metaphorically. Some argue, rather convincingly, that the phrase refers to the physical death of Christ.²¹ Certainly it is the physical death of Christ that provides the basis for any “spiritual circumcision” or metaphorical death experienced by the Colossians, but the context provides several difficulties for that position.²² We are going to argue for a commonly held interpretation that treats “body” as referring to the whole of something²³ and “flesh” as referring to the “moral principle which characterizes humanity...the fallenness that guides people naturally.”²⁴ In other words, in Christ, we have had the dominion of fallenness removed from us.

Several truths are derived from this reality throughout the New Testament:

(1) This “removal” is only experienced by those “in Christ” and has been accomplished through our identification/union with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection. – Cf. vv. 12-13; Romans 6:1-11.

(2) The dominion of sin (i.e., may be referred to as “the flesh” or “the old man/self/things” or “the body of sin”) has been destroyed in our lives. – “*Our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin*” (Romans 6:6; cf. Colossians 3:9).

(3) Believers now have a “new man” mentality²⁵ that operates within them as provided by Christ. This is His recreation. – “[We] have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created [it]” (Colossians 3:10).

(4) This “new man” enables us to practice righteousness that leads to life, for God now is our Master empowering us unto salvation. – “*But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you; being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness....now, being made free from sin and [having] become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life*” (Romans 6:17-18, 22).

(5) Therefore, believers are demonstrated to be a fundamentally new creation in which the “old man” has been removed and the “new man” created. – “*If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature—old things are passed away; behold, all things are becom[ing] new*” (II Corinthians 5:17).

(6) This “new man” mentality does not yet completely govern us, because it resides in our unredeemed bodies (i.e., also sometimes referred to as “flesh”—cf. Romans 7:14, 18; cf. Romans 8:23) which are still affected by sin. Therefore, we continue to struggle with sin, experiencing the “already [clinched], not yet [climaxed]” tension of our salvation. – “*I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members....So then, on the one hand I*

¹⁹ Vaughan, Curtis. Vol. 11, Colossians in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981. P. 200.

²⁰ Arndt, p. 100.

²¹ Cf. Carson, D. A. *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th Ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994. Colossians 2:6–15. Also cf. Dunn, James D. G. *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text in The New International Greek Testament Commentary*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996. Pp. 157-58.

²² Melick has a helpful explanation (p. 258).

²³ It cannot refer to our physical bodies, because those have not yet been redeemed (cf. Romans 8:23).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ I appreciated Melick’s caution against using the word “nature” here: “If the term ‘nature’ means a characteristic way of acting, the translation ‘nature’ is correct. At conversion, a believer begins to act a new way, giving evidence of a new nature. The term, however, is confusing because of the way it is often used by modern Christians. Many refer to an old nature and a new nature which are co-resident within the believer. Such an understanding confuses this passage. The old nature has been put off at the believer’s circumcision, and it is no longer present” (pp. 258-259).

myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin” (Romans 7:21-25, NASB).

(7) This struggle begins in the mind or heart or inner man (cf. Romans 7:21-25), where we must chose either (a) to obey the old man and serve the old master of sin, whose dominion has already been broken, or (b) to obey the new man and submit to our new master of righteousness. – *“Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:11-14, NASB).*

(8) We are helped in this battle, when we preach to ourselves the gospel-truth of our union with Christ and believe it by faith. In other words, “Self, in Christ Jesus I have been set free from the dominion of sin unto the liberty of righteousness, and I believe that Jesus’ ‘new way’ will both satisfy me and glorify God; therefore, I will chose not to sin. I will be [in practice] who I am [in position].” – Cf. *Romans 6:1-11; Ephesians 4:20-32; Colossians 3:1-10.*



Application: These verses demonstrate that Christ is the sufficient source of spiritual continuation and success, for he has removed from us the body our the flesh. How might you apply these thoughts to coveteousness? Impatience? Bitterness? Etc.? Cf. *Colossians 3:1-14*

b. We’ve been regenerated through our union with Christ (vv. 12-13a).

The previous point used the image of circumcision to demonstrate the negative aspect of our union with Christ—in our identification with His death, our “old man” has been removed (cf. Romans 6:6). Verses 12-13 move to the positive aspect of our union, employing the metaphor of baptism to picture our regeneration.

In its context, it is obvious that Paul is not referring here to water baptism. MacArthur explains,

When viewed as a rite necessary for salvation, baptism is as superfluous as circumcision. Some see support in 2:12 for baptismal regeneration, but Paul would hardly replace one rite with another (cf. 1 Cor. 1:13–17). Arguing that the change from spiritual death to spiritual life is effected by water baptism would make Paul as much of a ritualist as

those he was condemning. Water baptism is no more in view in 2:12 than physical circumcision was in 2:11. Both verses speak of spiritual realities.²⁶

Paul has in mind here spiritual baptism (cf. I Corinthians 12:13), which is pictured by water baptism. Foundationally, baptism beautifully pictures our union to and identification with Christ. Paul employs three compound words in these verses that begin with the preposition *sun-*, denoting activity “with” someone, and each time He underlines that such activity occurs “with” or “in” Christ—(1) “buried [together] with Him,” (2) “risen [together] with [lit. *in*] Him,” (3) “quicken[ed] [or ‘made alive’] together with Him.” The point is that Christ died, was buried, and has been raised in our place and on our behalf, and what He accomplished in those events applies directly to those who are identified with Him. We get what He accomplished!

The particular benefit of union with Christ being stressed in these two verses is regeneration. According to verse 13, the Colossian believers had been “dead in sins” and “uncircumcised in their flesh”²⁷—thus, both by practice and nature, they were sinners and condemned. But through spiritual baptism, they had “risen with Him” when God “quicken[ed] [them] together with Him.”

While God is the only One who can accomplish such a regeneration, as He did in the resurrection of His own Son (i.e., “God, who hath raised [Christ] from the dead,” v. 12), only those who have “faith in the operation [lit. ‘working’] of God” are “identified with God’s Son and are made participators in the redeeming effects of His death and the regenerating life of His resurrection.”²⁸ The power of God revealed in the resurrection of His Son provides a sure foundation and reasonable motivation for our faith in God’s ability.

Application: Christ is the source of spiritual life—abundant now and eternal later—a new quality of life!

c. We’ve been forgiven through the death of Christ (vv. 13b-14).

The last phrase of verse 13 reads, “having forgiven you all trespasses.” “By identifying believers with Christ who paid sin’s penalty by his death, God has forgiven all transgressions.”²⁹ This resulting

²⁶ MacArthur, pp. 107-08. Cf. also Melick, pp. 259-261.

²⁷ Several commentators note the unique Gentile-ness of this phrase (cf. Ephesians 2:10-12), and that is certainly a legitimate observation. However, the most obvious connection of this phrase is with the spiritual circumcision addressed in verse 11. The Colossian believers, Jew and Gentile, had formerly been in a spiritually uncircumcised state.

²⁸ Kent, p. 93.

²⁹ Ibid.

forgiveness translates a Greek word (*charizomai*) that is related to the word for “grace” (*charis*) and means “to show oneself gracious by forgiving wrongdoing; to forgive or pardon.”³⁰ God is a gracious God, ready to forgive (Psalm 86:5), and such forgiveness is lavishly extended to those in Christ.

Verse 14 explains how the condition for such forgiveness was established. For God to be just, our sins could not simply be eternally overlooked; no, the penalty for such sins needed to be fully paid (cf. Romans 3:25-26). And those sins were great! Verse 14 illustrates our sin as a “handwriting of ordinances.” “Handwriting” actually refers to a certificate of indebtedness, an IOU that would have been signed by the debtor to acknowledge his monetary obligation. In this case, the debt had to do with “ordinances” or decrees of God, which refers to the Mosaic law in Ephesians 2:15. Since God’s law is written in the hearts of the Gentiles, as well (Romans 2:14-15), both Jews and Gentiles owe God a debt because they have violated His decrees. This spiritual IOU owed to God was “against us” and “contrary [or opposed] to us,” condemning us under a curse (cf. Galatians 3:10) and hounding us into debtor’s prison, as it were.

However, Christ was sufficient to deal with our debt on our behalf. Kent explains the three actions of God in this verse—“blotting out,”³¹ “took away,” and “nailing”:

*Frist, [God] has erased the debt. Christ’s death was sufficient to cancel the bond against the sinner completely. Second, He has removed the bill itself from its position as a barrier between Himself and sinners....Third, the bill of debt was nailed to the cross and it perished along with Christ.*³²

Therefore, since Christ has paid for our sin, God can freely and graciously pardon us in Him.

Application: Christ is the source of spiritual health, harmony, friendship, and peace, for He has been the means of our relationship back to God!

Application: The application really goes back to verse 8. Since verses 9-15 are reality, don’t be taken captive by deficient human philosophy. When it comes to what you do and why you do it, what drives you in life and what you strive to accomplish, how you develop as a person and what model you’re looking to, don’t sit at the feet of humans and their “wisdom.” Sit at the feet of the Rabbi Himself, who as the sufficient God-man, can provide you with the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He, who is the Source and Giver of life, is sufficiently able to direct you in the philosophy of life and living. So, in salvation and sanctification, Christ is enough!

Furthermore, these verses remove the idea of a Christian elite. Education and academic degrees do not make one more spiritually complete than another. We are all equally full in Christ. The one without a college degree is not somehow disadvantaged in His relationship with God through Christ. He is as fully identified with Christ, as is the doctoral candidate. Thus, he can also come to all the right conclusions regarding the philosophy of life and living, for those answers are found in Christ alone, of whom He has the fullness.

CONCLUSION

We could have included verse 15 as a fourth result of Christ’s sufficient work. However, it provide a fitting and climactic conclusion for our lesson. This verse has been explained in two different ways depending on how one interprets “principalities and powers.” Some interpret it to refer to Christ’s disarming of evil angels, by exposing and disgracing them publicly as He triumphed over them by His cross. Others take it to depict God’s divesting Himself of mediatory angels through whom He had given the Law, since He had fully accomplished salvation in Christ, and thus leading them in triumph. Both interpretations highlight the great victory that has been accomplished by our sufficient Christ.

Why would we allow human philosophy and worldly wisdom to be our teacher and guide in life, when Christ alone is sufficient for complete deliverance, powerful regeneration, full forgiveness, and cosmic victory? He is the source of spiritual fullness, satisfaction, meaning, and purpose; He provides spiritual life and success, and He brings us back to God in harmony and peace. He must be the foundation of our philosophies.

- What is your philosophy of purpose in life?
- What is your philosophy of success?
- What is your philosophy of decision making?
- What is your philosophy of personal growth and development?
- What is your philosophy of parenting?
- What is your philosophy of work?
- What is your philosophy of dating?

³⁰ Arndt, p. 1078.

³¹ “*Exaleipho* (canceled out) means ‘to wipe off,’ like erasing a blackboard. Ancient documents were commonly written either on papyrus, a paperlike material made from the bulrush plant, or vellum, which was made from an animal’s hide. The ink used then had no acid in it and did not soak into the writing material. Since the ink remained on the surface, it could be wiped off if the scribe wanted to reuse the material” (MacArthur, p. 111).

³² Kent, p. 94.

If your philosophy is not Christ-centered, Christ-focused, Christ-informed, Christ-taught, and Christ-honoring, then you may have been taken captive by the deficient and destructive philosophies of this world. Since Christ alone has the “treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” refocus on Him in your pursuit of wisdom.