

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

Filled with the Fullness of Jesus

Colossians 2:8-10

Mark Vroegop

8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority (Col 2:8-10)

World Magazine reported in their latest issue that UPS, the world's largest package delivery company, has discovered a unique way to cut their gasoline costs: stop making left turns.

"According to executives at the international package delivery service, computer mapping software and traffic modeling has led them to conclude that delivery drivers should avoid making left turns. By mapping out routes that aim for only right-hand turns, the company saved 3.3 million gallons of gasoline in 2007. According the UPS research, drivers waste time and gas idling while waiting for left-hand turn signals. Even with the more circuitous path, the company estimates that it saved more than \$9 millions in 2007."¹

I smiled when I read this piece because I couldn't help but think of the response of executives when they first heard the idea. "Mr. President, our idea to save fuel costs is to not make left turns in 2007." Yet it worked. They found a way to improve the efficiency of the company by establishing a new rule or law – no left turns.

The new rule worked for UPS, but unfortunately when it comes to their spiritual growth many people try to do the same thing. They believe that there is some kind of missing formula, trick, or new route that they could take which will make them grow faster, better, or more efficiently. I've seen it happen so many times: well-meaning believers who flock to a particular seminar, book, conference, church, or speaker in a desperate search to find their spiritual "missing link."

Some of the resources are just plain lies. Others are actually rather helpful. But the problem is that slowly, over time, I've seen people begin to talk more about the seminar, the book, the conference, the church, or the speaker and the name Jesus is noticeably absent. And the reality of the person's trust is more on methods, the pathway, or the means. You see, it is not that they have denied Jesus; they just forget to mention him when someone asks how they changed their life.

¹ "No Left Turn" World Magazine. July 26/August 2, 2008. P. 13

Paul was in a battle for the hearts and minds of the Colossian believers. There was a growing movement in the church that was causing them to focus more rules, regulations, human tradition, spiritual forces, and severe discipline than upon Christ. The problem was not that they denied Christ; they still believed that he was the Son of God. No, the real problem was one of focus and trust. The teachers of this “improved” means of spirituality were, to use Peter O’Brien’s² description, “spiritual confidence tricksters.” They were deceiving people by creating confidence in the wrong things.

I’m going to call this “spiritual drift,” a subtle departure in focus and trust in what is really important or effective. It is a drift first of thinking, then affection, and finally action. Colossians 2:8-10 is powerful reminder that people who have received Christ as their Savior are filled with the fullness of Jesus. In other words, Jesus is sufficient; you cannot improve upon Him.

Therefore, preventing spiritual drift (a shift in focus and trust) comes by focusing on the sufficiency of Jesus. Our text this morning is a classic warning / solution passage. It gives us both a warning in verse 8 and a solution in verses 9-10.

Warning: Think about your thinking! (v 8)

This section (2:8-3:4) on Jesus-centered thinking begins with a warning about what could happen to them if they didn’t remain vigilant. Spiritual drift is subtle, but it is dangerous nonetheless. He wants us to think about what is going on in our hearts and minds.

1. Know that you could drift

Paul gives a strong warning in verse 8! They weren’t thinking about what they were doing or the implications of what their new beliefs. They were not using discernment, and they didn’t realize the dangerous path that some of them were on.

The first word in the text means to look at, to behold, to perceive, or to take heed.³ The ESV, NASB, and NIV render it “See to it.” That is not a bad translation, but there seems to be a stronger warning here than those words capture. The KJV, NKJV, and the Message translate it as “beware” and “watch out.” I like that better. This is a strong warning, a command.

Further, this was something that required vigilance on their part. The tense and voice suggest that they must continually and actively be on guard. The danger, you see, was not from a direct attack. It was from a series of seemingly minor decisions that would one day result in someone saying, “What was I thinking?” And the answer would be, “I wasn’t.” That’s the

² Peter O’Brien. Colossians and Philemon: Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, Texas: Word Books Publishers, 1982. p. 109.

³ See also Mark 13:9, Phil 3:2, 2 John 8

problem: a lack of vigilance with our thinking. I've said this before but I want to mention it again: the problem with our thinking is that we don't think about our thinking. And once the mind is committed, the heart will soon follow. When thoughts and affections grab a hold of you, it is hard work (however, not impossible) to go back.

That is why the Bible frequently calls us to realize the danger of wrong thinking and wrong affections:

- Prov 4:23 - Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life (NIV)
- Ps 139:23 - Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! (ESV)
- Jer 17:9-10 - The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind..." (ESV)
- Matt 15:19 - For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander (ESV)
- Col 3:2 - Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.
- Phil 4:8 - Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (ESV)

The danger of this is that your mind and heart cause you to be "taken captive." The word is used for those who have been carried off after losing a battle as prisoners of war. They are the spoils or booty of war. Paul wanted them to realize where their wrong thinking would lead: the captivity of error. And he wanted them to see what was really happening. He wanted them to see where this could lead.

So the first thing that I just want to put into your mind today is the reality of this warning. Watch out for drifting thinking. Know that you could drift.

2. Know the signs of "drifting teaching"

What happens next in the text is very helpful. Paul describes some of the characteristics of this drifting teaching:

New level of knowledge – the false teachers were offering the people a philosophy or a way of thinking that gave them a new or special level of knowledge. Their teaching was not godless or immoral; that kind of error would have been easily spotted. This teaching was intellectual, special, elitist, and likely incorporated a syncretistic blend of secular thought and Christianity. Now I don't want you to think that the Bible is against philosophy or good thinking. However, we must be on guard when some one "discovers" a path to a level of spirituality or knowledge that few others have.

Little gospel focus – The phrase "empty deceit" is hard to translate, but it seems to mean that the philosophy that is eschewed is really an empty illusion, a hallow sham, and void of real

gospel content. In other words, it seems right at first, but later you discover that the focus, the tone, and the real trust has little to do with Jesus or the gospel. Let me warn you watch out for titles that promise how to do something God's way (Marriage God's Way, Family God's Way, Finances God's Way), but the focus is more upon a new methodology and not upon the power of the gospel.

Man-made tradition – The third and most telling characteristic is the focus on man-made structures, ideas, or methodologies. 1 Peter 1:18 uses the word translate here as “human tradition” to mean the futile religious tradition into which they had bought. Mark 7:8 uses the word to describe how the Pharisees left the commandment of God and held to the tradition of men. The problem here was that these teachers took their ideas, models, forms, and methodologies and presented them on par with Christ.

Now it is not that models, forms, or methodologies are necessarily bad, but we need to keep them in their place. We need watch out that our focus doesn't shift **from** Christ **to** these forms. The problem is often not a theological one (sometimes it is); it is a pragmatic one. What do you point people to? What do you talk about? What do you think works? What are you passionate about?

For example, I love the Puritans. I love their passion, their clarity, and the way that they turn a truth over and over until they get everything they can out of it. My life has been significantly impacted by their writings, and I have been greatly helped spiritually by them. But I would be guilty of man-made tradition if my love for the Puritans begins to be projected as the primary means by which people are helped or changed. I should watch out if I start to become known as Puritan-centered and not Jesus-centered. It is one thing to point someone toward a helpful book that leads them to Jesus, and another thing to think or say, “Oh, they've got to read John Owen on the mortification of sin or they'll never be free.”

And so my challenge to all us is to use creative means that lead people to Jesus, and watch out for man-made models that talk about helping people change without talking much about Jesus.

Spiritualizing – The text says “according to elemental spirits of the world” or “elementary principles of the world.” Most likely the characteristic here is linked to Galatians 4:3,9, where the people were observing the Jewish sacred calendar (Gal 4:10 – days, months, seasons, and years) and defining the observance of those things as something that “real Christians” do because it had been handed down to them by angels (see Gal 4:19). The Galatian problem was and spiritualizing parts of the law. The Colossian problem was similar with a spiritualizing of certain foods, drink, festivals, visions, the worship of angels, and particular regulations (see Col 2:16-22). They spiritualized these things and made them more than what they should have.

Perhaps these things were helpful to some. Maybe some major leader endorsed them. Maybe they were a part of their spiritual heritage. We don't know. However, what is clear is that these things were spiritualized beyond what they should have. These things became the core.

I have a suspicion that the Colossian believers never intended for these things to become central; it just happened. Epaphras probably said something like this to Paul: "I'm worried Paul. I've got a large group within the church, and it seems like all they talk about is the latest festival or what foods shouldn't be eaten. They're developing new guidelines and new strategies, and they've almost stopped talking about Jesus."

Absence of Christ – the final characteristic is probably the most helpful and the most telling. There is one characteristic that is very clear—the focus wasn't on Jesus. That is why it is called empty.

It is the gospel that is the power of God (Rom 1:16); it is Jesus who is the glory of the mystery (Col 1:27); all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Jesus (Col 2:3). We must be aware that the absence of Jesus leads to the presence of error. We must be sure that we continually focus on him. We have to ignite a passion for people to follow Jesus, not us. We must be vigilant in our thinking lest we begin to have spiritual confidence in other things. The issue here is not one of denial; it is one of confidence. Don't hope in a method, a treatment plan, or a formula. Put your hope in the gospel according to Jesus.

I am reading a biography of George Whitefield, and this week I found a perfect example of this very issue. There was a time in the ministry of John and Charles Wesley that people were so moved by their preaching that there were strange and controversial physical reactions like: crying, wailing, convulsions, and "fits." Charles Wesley came to see these as a manifestation of God's blessing. Some were genuinely a product of the Spirit's work. However his ministry began to drift a bit when "believing the emotional experiences to signify the special approval of God, he desired the demonstrations and encouraged them among his people."⁴ When the "signs" were absent he would pray, "Lord! Where are thy tokens and signs...?"⁵

George Whitefield wrote Charles to express his concern about Wesley's emphasis. Notice that Whitefield affirms that the "signs" are from God, and that his concern is about the substance of people's trust, not the signs themselves.

"I cannot think it right in you to give so much encouragement to those convulsions which people have been thrown into under your ministry...That there is something of God in it I doubt not; but the devil, I believe, does interpose. I think it will...take people away from the written word, and

⁴ Arnold Dallimore. George Whitefield – Vol 1. Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970. p. 325.

⁵ Dallimore, p. 326.

make them depend on visions, convulsions, etc., more than on the promises and precepts of the Gospel.”⁶

We need to think about our thinking. We need to be on guard and mindful of the potential for our own hearts to drift away from primary focus on Jesus and the life-changing power of the gospel.

Solution: Focus on Jesus

What then is the solution? Gratefully, Paul gives us a clear and rather obvious answer: focus on Jesus. Verses 9-10 identify two things. First, who he is, and secondly who we are in Him.

1. Who he is

Paul takes us back to yet another reminder of who Jesus is. He pulls our attention away from the shallow man-made solutions offered by the spiritual confidence tricksters, and he says, “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” The emphasis is on him. It is utterly foolish to put one’s confidence in these other man-made methods, because it is Christ who is the fullness of God in bodily form. In other words, the fullness of God rests in Jesus.

The teachers of error were purporting a deeper knowledge of God and a new way to know the Creator. Paul reminds all of us that Jesus is the personal revelation of the Father—fully disclosing to us what God is like. To see Jesus was to see God. To know Jesus is to know God.

But this means even more. It is not just that Jesus revealed or demonstrated God-like qualities, the nuance of the word deity means that the entire fullness of deity dwells in Christ.⁷ He is the full expression of triune God; he is the essential and adequate image of God. That is why I’m really comfortable saying that I am a follower of Jesus because in him the fullness of deity dwells. He is the very essence of the triune God.

Again we see the centrality of Jesus and the gospel expressed in this book. In 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul said that he wanted to know nothing among the church except Jesus Christ and him crucified. The reason that Jesus-centeredness is important is because there is no power apart from him and his work. We have to keep connecting people back to him.

You see, Jesus-centered thinking is more than just knowing that you are saved. It means that you know, believe, think, and teach that there is no power in anyone else. The New Testament and the Old all point to him (see Luke 24:27). Therefore, we have to constantly ask ourselves

⁶ Dallimore, p. 328.

⁷ O’Brien, p. 111.

how any passage connects us to the redemptive plan in Jesus. Every spiritual road in the Old and New Testament has to lead to Jesus.

So we must be careful of what Bryan Chappell in his book Christ-centered Preaching calls “the Deadly Be’s.” These are well-meaning Sunday School lessons, counseling sessions, sermons, or Bible Studies and the focus is the following:

- “Be Like So and So”
- “Be Good”
- “Be Disciplined”

The problem, especially in using Old Testament stories and character studies, is that you can sound expositional and biblical while missing Jesus. You could tell kids to be like David when he’s fighting Goliath and not connect the story to God’s redemptive plan in Jesus. You could call adults to have good marriages and even give them four Biblical keys to marriage but neglect the heart of the message of the Bible. You could call people to be more disciplined while neglecting the power of Christ to make it work.

Faithful exposition not only teaches the text; it teaches the text in the context of how it connects to redemption. It takes us back to who Jesus is.

2. Who you are in Him

The second solution is to continually connect people to who they are in Jesus. The first point is about content; this one is about position. Paul reminds us that Jesus is “the head of all rule and authority” and that “you have been filled in him.”

Colossians 2 is filled with phrases that focus us on Christ this way: 2:6 – walk in him, 2:7 – rooted and built up in him, 2:10 – filled in him, 2:11 – in him you were circumcised, 2:12 – buried with him in baptism, 2:12 – raised with him, and 2:13 – made alive together with him.

Jesus is full of deity, you are connected to him, and you are full of his fullness. You are complete. This means that people who have never come to faith in Christ are incomplete. But when you repent of your sins and turn to Christ as your sacrifice, you are complete again; you are reconciled to God.

You are complete in Christ. You are fully forgiven. Grace has taken over your life. God declared “there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). Therefore, any obedience that comes out of your life flows from the bedrock of God’s complete pleasure over you because of Christ.

Beloved, we need to think this way! We need to see who Jesus is, and we need to see who we are in Him. We approach studying the Bible, prayer times, evangelism, giving, and any serving that we do as an expression of Christ in you, the hope of glory.

We've got to stop separating Jesus from the church. We've got to stop living around him and learn to live by him. We've got to see that real life change and real spiritual maturity come from knowing Him. Christianity is personal. It is about Jesus. Don't drift from him.

On the last day of our vacation, I thought I was going have to risk my life to save two boys in the water. It was a windy day, and two eleven year-old boys were playing with an inflatable tube. Sarah and I were on the beach watching as the tube slowly started to drift away from them. So they started to swim after it. However, the wind was such that it kept blowing the tube further and further out – just out of their reach. Well, after a while one of them started complaining about cramps, but they kept swimming further and further out. About this time, I knew that they were going to be in trouble because now they were about 75 yards from shore, and the tube was still moving.

I got up and stood by the edge of the lake planning how I was going to rescue these boys. I looked around for their parents, but they were not around. There were a lot of things going through my mind as the boys kept going further and further out, and I decided before I would do anything daring that I would try to call them back. So with a firm voice I said, "Boys, you are too far out. You need to come back." Gratefully they turned around and swam back when they realized how far from shore they were. It didn't take long and a drifting tube had led them into dangerous territory.

Some of you are like that today. It is not that you've denied Christ; it's that you've drifted from spiritual confidence in him. Maybe it has led to some serious mistakes, dabbling in thoughts or actions that today you look at and say, "What was I thinking!"

I want you to heed the call of God today to come back. I want you to watch out – to think about your thinking. I want you to return to the sufficiency of Christ.

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