

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

Colossians 4:16-18

"Goodbye Colossians"

Mark Vroegop

16 And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea. 17 And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."
18 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you (Col 4:16-18).

Today we bring to closure our study of the book of Colossians. It has been a wonderful journey together, discovering what it means to live with Jesus at the center or the core. We've talked about some incredible truths about Jesus, learned about our position in Christ, and we discovered how to apply it to the real world of marriage, family, and work. My illustrations have run the gamut: from duck tape and hot sauce to Oprah and Laminin, from pictures of Jeremiah waterskiing to personal lessons from a backslash argument.

This book will always be special to me. I remember the first series I preached at Calvary, and I will not forget this one at College Park. God specifically led me to this book as we were driving back from the congregational vote in February. When I introduced this series, I gave you four reasons why I had chosen Colossians. Let me remind you again:

1. It contains some of the most glorious passages about Christ in all the Bible
2. It fits perfectly College Park's historical principle to keep the Main One the main thing
3. It applies the centrality of Jesus to marriage, home, and work
4. Living Jesus-centered is a primary battleground

I trust that your life, like mine, will be forever impacted by this book. This is the 26th message on Colossians, and in this final message I'd like to ask us one question:

In light of what we've learned from Colossians, what does it mean for College Park to fulfill our ministry? In part it means not forgetting the lessons that God has taught us through this book.

Final Words

The final verses of Colossians don't end with a large crescendo or a bang. Rather this glorious book ends with personal and heart-felt words from a pastor who loves his people. For Paul, the issues that he has talked about throughout the book are directly related to people that are on

his heart. In other words, the centrality and supremacy of Jesus is important because it is personal. And that is the way that Christology is supposed to be – personal.

To the Church: Share truth with each other

Verse 16 identifies that the letter should be read to the church at Laodicea which was 10 miles west of Colossae. The church at Laodicea is mentioned again in the New Testament in Revelation 3:14-22. It is often called the lukewarm church, and this is the place where we find the infamous passage regarding Jesus standing outside the church:

15 "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (Rev 3:15-20).

The church is rebuked for its lack of usefulness, its pride, and its exclusion of Christ from the midst of their assembly.

There's something else worth noting in verse 16. Another letter is mentioned. Paul says, "see that you read the letter from Laodicea." What is going on here? Well, we are not 100% sure, but it seems that Paul wrote a letter to the Laodicean church, a letter that we do not have nor is it inspired. It might help you to know that Paul wrote more letters than what we actually have, and that not everything he or any Biblical writer wrote is considered inspired.

Inspiration by definition means "God-breathed" (see 2 Tim 3:16) and that men, as they wrote, were "carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Certain letters and books were deemed to be inspired based upon three criteria: 1) authority – who wrote the letter, 2) uniqueness – does it exhibit inspired qualities? 3) acceptance – did the letter gain acceptance by the churches?¹ Apparently this letter was valuable to the church, but it was not included in the collection of inspired Scripture that we call the canon.

Paul wanted the message of this book to spread, and he wanted the church at Colossae to learn from the Laodiceans. Both churches needed to see the value of spiritual growth together.

To Archippus: Fulfill your ministry

¹ Charles Ryrie. Basic Theology. Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press, 1988. p. 108.

Verse 17 identifies a man named Archippus. He is listed in Philemon 2: "To Philemon our beloved fellow worker 2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house." So it is likely that he was a part of Philemon's household and maybe even a son. But the charge to him causes me to think that he had a significant pastoral role in the area. Colossians 4:17 says, "17 And say to Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord."

Apparently the Colossian church was to deliver that message to him. It may be that he had a role in the ministry at Laodicea, since Paul's words seem to be rather instructive. It appears that Paul wanted him to understand that his ministry was 1) from the Lord, and 2) he needed to fulfill it.

I found those two thoughts helpful this week. It was this weekend, one year ago, that my wife and I slipped down to Indianapolis to visit College Park, to be here on a Sunday, and see if it was a good fit for us. That was really the beginning of a process of receiving a new call from the Lord. God led all of through that process, and we saw the clear hand of God orchestrating every detail. It is so good to know that this is "of the Lord." But there's more here. With every call of God there comes a ministry that needs to be fulfilled. God doesn't send us places or put specific calls upon our hearts aimlessly. He has a purpose, and we need to fulfill His plan.

As we bring 2008 to a close, I've been praying and seeking the Lord for specific things that he wants me to fulfill in 2009, specific things that he wants College Park Church to fulfill. God has a plan for us; our role is to seek Him so that we might discover it.

To my dear people: Don't forget me or God's grace

The final verse (18) is a very personal one for the apostle Paul. The entire book was written by a scribe who was recording Paul's words. But this verse is written by Paul himself. So feel the personal nature of this passage. It may have even been that the hand which wrote these final words was literally a chained hand.

It is stunning and emotional to hear what Paul says: Remember my chains. The implication is that Paul wanted them to not forget him while he was imprisoned. It almost seems as if Paul wanted to be sure that his ministry to them was not a waste or as if he needed to know that his imprisonment was not creating an "out of sight – out of mind" mentality. Do you hear the personal nature of this appeal? It is moving to see the humanity of the beloved apostle Paul. It reminds me that ministry is deeply personal, and that is the way it should be. Being of minister of the gospel is something that gets into your heart. It is a calling to give not just your time, energy, or talents; it is a calling to give every part of oneself including your heart. And that is why Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, describes his care for the church like a "nursing mother taking care of her own children." And why John in 3 John 4 says, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in truth." Paul pleads with them not to forget him

in his chains. He wants their prayers, their love, and their allegiance. Maybe Paul just wanted to be assured that the ministry would continue.

Finally, the book closes with a statement that we find in other books of the Bible (see Rom 16:20, 24; 1 Cor 16:23; 2 Cor 13:13; Gal 6:18). "Grace be with you" is more than just a final greeting. It expresses Paul heart for the church, and it was how Colossians began: "To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father" (1:2).

Now in the original language there is no verb. It simply reads "Grace with you." We have to supply a verb to make it a good English sentence. "Be" is a good choice. However, it doesn't necessarily mean "be" in a future sense as if you are missing the word "will" (i.e., Grace will be with you). I don't think Paul is saying that.

Rather, he is saying that "God's grace will sustain the community, for it is by grace alone that they will stand."² So he certainly is wishing something for them. But his wish is not for something that they lack. His longing for them, captured in the benediction, is for them to fully apprehend the grace of God that they've been given. It is a full appreciation and application of the grace of their position in Christ. Romans 5:1-2 captures the heart of this very well:

Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:1-3).

So Paul's heart for these Colossian believers is that they would not soon forget evident grace of God in their midst. He wants them to stand in the grace that they've been given.

Standing In The Grace We've Been Given

So let me translate these final words from Colossians into our own context. What does it mean for us to stand in the grace that we have received from this book? You see, there are some lessons that, as your pastor, I don't want you to ever forget. Let me remind you and rehearse with you some of the defining lessons of this book:

1. Jesus is core. You don't make him core. He is the core. Deal with it.

This was the premise for our entire series, but it didn't full emerge until we came to 1:16-18.

16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

² Peter O'Brien. Colossians and Philemon – Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, Texas: Word Publishing, 1982. p. 260.

17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. Col 1:16-18

It was the word pre-eminent that captured Eric's heart such that he wrote a beautiful song, capturing the heart and soul of what this book is about. I want you to never forget that you don't make Him lord; He is lord.

I trust that you will always know that, like the logo for this series, your life was meant to revolve around Jesus.

2. There is nothing that Jesus cannot handle. Jesus Can!

"Just Do It" doesn't work. I want you to be "JESUS CAN" people. No matter what your challenge is today.

- "I am an awful sinner, and I could never pay for my sins." JESUS CAN!
- "I've made such a mess of my life. I can't fix what I've done." JESUS CAN!
- "I've been so hurt. I don't have the power to even think of loving them, let alone forgive them. I can't create love for them." JESUS CAN.
- "I have a friend with really deep problems. I don't know what to say. I don't think I can help them." JESUS CAN.
- "Our son won't listen to us. His heart is hard. We can't get through to him." JESUS CAN.
- "Life is too hard and the pain too real. I cannot do this again!" JESUS CAN.
- "I'm so confused. My problems are so complicated and challenging. I can't figure out what to do!" JESUS CAN.

3. When we suffer, we make the word heard.

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, 25 of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,

"God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of his people. God really means for the body of Christ, the church, to experience some of the suffering he experienced so that when we offer the Christ of the cross to people, they see the Christ of the cross in us."³

³ John Piper. "Called to Suffer and Rejoice: To Finish the Aim of Christ's Afflictions." www.desiringgod.org August 30, 1992.

During the series on Colossians we said goodbye to four suffering saints who made the word heard: Shonda Cuppy, Sophie Carmichael, Al Archambault, and Tom McElroy.

4. Man-made rules do not work

The problem is that we try, in our own power, to be moral, or we try, in our own power, to make the church pure. Both are failures to trust God and his power. We need to hear the scary truth of Colossians 2:23 – “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.”

The enemy doesn't care if he can destroy you with Godless sensuality or Godless spirituality. All he cares about is that it is Godless. But the problem – the frightening problem – with Godless spirituality is that those guilty of it feel spiritual. A sensual man feels guilty. A spiritually proud man feels religious.

5. We live vicariously through Christ.

Vicarious living means that we live through another, and I called you to see that God wants us to live vicariously every day. We need to live through our position in Christ.

11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. Col 2:11-12

Position precedes practice. Live vicariously!

6. We mortify sin through intentional atrophy

This is probably one of the most helpful things that I've discovered in my study in the last five years. To mortify means to embrace intentional atrophy; to intentionally choose to not use my flesh so that it grows weaker and weaker - to make our flesh as good as dead.

We need to put away girly-man Christian living where our spiritual life is weak because of a lack of exercise. Choose to not exercise the flesh.

7. Bring Jesus into your marriage, family, and work

Finally, I want you to remember that the idea of Jesus being the core is supposed to translate directly into the relationships of our lives.

- Wives are to be submissive

- Husbands are to love their wives
- Children are to obey their parents
- Slaves are to be submissive to their masters
- Masters are to be fair and just

In other words every area of life is to be impacted by the reality and the power of the pre-eminence of Jesus.

These are the lessons that we ought never forget. This book is sacred ground for me. God met me here many, many times. And I trust that it has been the same for you.

The concept of Jesus being the Core is a powerful, life-changing idea. And so we bid farewell to this glorious book with gratitude for what God has taught us and I trust a deep resolve to discover for the rest of our lives what it means for Jesus to be the pre-eminent One.

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