

Notes on Colossians

by C.I. Scofield

C.I. Scofield's sermon on Colossians addresses the dangers of false teachings and emphasizes the believer's completeness in Christ through faith and grace.

Scripture: Colossians 1:1, Colossians 2:8, Colossians 2:16, Colossians 2:20, Colossians 3:1, Colossians 3:5, Colossians 3:12, Colossians 3:16, Colossians 4:2

Topics: "Christ Supremacy", "Christian Living"

Description

C.I. Scofield preaches about the Epistle to the Colossians, highlighting the establishment of churches in Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, and the challenges faced by the believers due to errors in doctrine. The Epistle addresses the dangers of legalism and false philosophies, particularly Gnosticism, emphasizing the supremacy and work of Christ. Paul urges believers to focus on heavenly things, mortify earthly desires, and live in the newness of life in Christ, rejecting man-made traditions and ascetic practices. The Epistle concludes with practical instructions on living a life pleasing to God, emphasizing love, thankfulness, and the importance of prayer.

Transcript

About one hundred miles east of Ephesus, in the peninsula called Asia Minor, the "Asia" of the Acts and Epistles, were situated the three towns mentioned in this Epistle--Colosse (i:1), Laodicea (iv:13, 16), and Hierapolis (iv:13). In these places in the year 64 churches of Christ had been established. This region lay outside the sphere of Paul's missionary labors in Asia, and these churches doubtless represent the effect of that secondary wave of missionary effort proceeding from Ephesus during Paul's residence there in A. D. 58 and 59, of which mention is made Acts xix:10.

Colosse has long since perished, and the place is remembered among men only because of what God wrought in behalf of the little group of believers gathered there.

The occasion of the Epistle is readily gathered from its contents, from the Epistle to the Saints in Ephesus, and that to Philemon.

Paul was now (A. D. 64), a prisoner at Rome. Among those with whom he came into contact and who were born again through his gospel labors, was a runaway slave from Colosse named, oddly enough, Onesimus (i, e. "profitable"). Onesimus was the slave of a prominent Christian, Philemon of Colosse. It was a first demand of righteousness that Onesimus should return to his master, and in his behalf Paul

wrote the letter to Philemon, "which belongs, even as regards its Attic refinement and gracefulness, to the epistolary masterpieces of antiquity."-- Meyer.

But other matters were stirring Paul to his depths. His fellow-prisoner, Epaphras had been "a faithful minister of Christ" to the church at Colosse, and he had communicated to the Apostle his own deep concern for the saints at Colosse and Laodicea respecting certain errors of doctrine which had found entrance there.

The state of the church as to fundamentals was still excellent, but subtle errors absolutely subversive of true Christianity were leavening the good meal. What that leaven was we gather from Paul's refutation.

Briefly, it was legality mingled with a false philosophic mysticism. "Beware," says the Apostle, "lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit"--that is one part of the danger. "After the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world"--the other part of the danger.

"Rudiments of the world" is Paul's phrase for the law, and for all mere formalism and externalism in religion. But this was not Judaic legality, emanating from Jerusalem, as in Galatia, but a mystical legality emanating probably from Alexandria. The former consisted in letter-bondage to the law--that is to written precept; the philosophic legality consisted in being "wise above what was written" a strictness beyond letter of Scripture--in a word, asceticism: "Touch not, taste not," etc., and severities inflicted on the body.

The philosophy was that which came later to be called Gnosticism (Greek gnosis --"knowledge"). The core of the Gnostic heresy was its doctrine of Christ, "to whom they did not leave His full divine dignity, but assigned to Him merely the first rank in the higher order of spirits"-- Heinrich A. W. Meyer.

The effect of gnosticism was to put God at an infinite distance from men; to fill that distance with orders of angelic beings; and to give Christ only the highest place among these.

Matter was conceived of as evil, and the material creation as the work of a lower spiritual being whom they called the Demiurge.

Gnosticism has passed away as a philosophy, but the efforts to degrade Christ from His full and proper deity; to make a merit of ascetic practices ("touch not, taste not"); and to conceive of the body and the natural physical desires as inherently evil and degrading--these, under ever new forms, survive and are abroad to-day. Against them Colossians is a perpetual and unanswerable declaration of the Spirit of God.

Between a false legality and a false philosophy of Christ, His person, His work, and His universe, the true Christian faith ever moves.

Chapter I.

This chapter falls naturally into three parts: I. Introductory, vs. 1-8. II. The Apostolic prayer, vs. 9-14. III. The supremacy and work of Christ, vs. 15-29.

The Apostle begins with the usual affirmation of the divine origin of his apostleship. He is an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God (cf. Gal. i:1, 11, 12). This is an affirmation of immense importance. If Paul is a theologian framing a system of doctrines which he believes to embody Christian truth, that is one thing; if he is God's sent-one communicating words from God, that is another thing. He affirms everywhere and always that he is the latter.

And the first thing the Spirit bids him write to the Saints at Colosse is a message from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. That message is, "Grace be unto you, and peace"; a message, not a pious wish. Remember that. It is always grace, and it is always peace. The Father may have a controversy with us about some of our ways, but the peace made by the blood of His cross ever abides, and every motion of the divine heart toward us is grace.

The Apostle is thankful to God for three things concerning the Colossians, their faith, love, and hope. This is the true order. The object of faith is Christ Jesus, of love, the saints-- all Saints, and not merely the lovable Saints. That is the real test of faith, "love towards all the saints." "Lovest thou me? Feed my sheep." Faith begins with a backward look to Calvary; love looks around upon the brethren; hope looks forward to the coming of the Lord.

This kind of fruit is what Paul expects. The gospel is a vitalizing principle, not merely a "plan of salvation." Where the grace of God is known in truth fruit follows, the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit. And love, love toward all saints, comes first, and is first.

The Colossians learned that from Epaphras, now Paul's fellow prisoner. He is called a faithful minister of Christ. The word for "minister" is *diaconos* --servant, "deacon." In our fear of what is called "one man ministry" let us not pervert the Scriptures. There were men in the Apostolic churches who did not go about. The churches of Jesus Christ need shepherding as well as teaching. No one can do that who does not know the sheep, and who is not known to the sheep. Epaphras, says Paul, "is one of you." Men running about with doctrines, however good, zealous and well-taught, can never be that to the local assemblies.

And this brings us to the great Apostolic prayer. There is in it a beautiful seven-fold moral order.

(1) All begins with the will of God. The primary reference is to that will as it concerns the believer of this dispensation. "According to the good pleasure of His will" He has predestinated us to the adoption of sons. Sonship is more than childship. The Old Testament saints were children, but were kept under the law as a pedagogue, and differed nothing from servants. But Christ has changed all that by redemption. Now we are no more servants, but sons.

(2) And this gives character to the walk. The knowledge of His will in our position as sons is essential to a walk "unto all pleasing." The returning prodigal had so lost the sense of what was suited to the father's heart and mind as to think only of a hired servant's place. Too many make this mistake, supposing it to be true humility, when it is only grieving the Father's heart, and thwarting the Father's will.

(3) And now we come to what so many put first--work. But it makes all the difference whether we work as sons or as servants. It makes all the difference whether we work in the place where His will has put us, or in a place and way of self-choosing. Before the Lord speaks of fruit-bearing He puts the disciples in their right place. "Henceforth I call you not servants . . . but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye shall go and bring forth fruit."

In the body of Christ every member has a place and function sovereignly fixed "as it hath pleased Him." In that place and fulfilling that function, fruit is sure.

(4) "And increasing in the knowledge of God." This goes beyond the knowledge of His will to an ever deeper knowledge of Him who wills. This order may not be varied; to know His will; to walk in a way suited to the place which that will has given us; to be diligent in our appointed work--^these are the indispensable

steps to personal and first hand acquaintanceship with God.

(5) The fifth element is strength in view of the inescapable experiences, which await the believers. And how adequate the provision, "all might, according to His glorious power."

(6) And this again is not an end but, like the knowledge of His will, a means to an end. The end is two-fold; the attainment of patience, and of a joy so fundamental that suffering, though long continued, cannot quench it.

(7) But the crown of all Christian experience is "giving thanks." The Apostle sets forth the reasons for thankfulness. They are found in the permanent results of the work of Christ. Note the past tense. "Hath made us meet"; "Hath delivered us"; "Hath translated us"; "We have redemption, even the forgiveness of sins." Underneath all the shifting experiences of the believer's life, and the ebb and flow of his feelings, these eternal results of redemption abide. They are safe in the changeless past.

"My soul looks back to see

The burden thou did'st bear,

While hanging on the cursed tree.

And knows her guilt was THERE."

No believer may know abiding peace until he sees that before the world was he chosen in Christ, and that centuries before He was born God Himself took up the question of His guilt and forever disposed of it in the cross of Christ. It can never be brought in issue again. God will not do it, and "if God be for us who can be against us?" "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" Our shameful sin is *res adjudicata* --a matter already and forever adjudicated.

Chapter II.

The Apostle conies now to the core of the Epistle, the dangers to the simple and pure faith of the Gospel, which had aroused his solicitude in behalf of the saints at Colosse. If these had been local and transitory they might well be passed over with slight mention.

But so it was in the divine providence that the perils to the faith at Colosse were the ever present perils in the midst of which the saints of all the centuries have lived. Paul prefaces the statement of them with an exhortation (Col. ii:1-7). In two things the Apostle would have the saints knit together, in love and in an understanding and acknowledgment of the "mystery."

A "mystery" in Scripture is some truth which has been kept back but is now revealed. There are seven such mysteries in the New Testament, and, save the first, the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, each is mentioned repeatedly. Here it is the mystery of God, that is Christ.¹ A false mysticism was abroad at Colosse; the Spirit of God will meet this with the true mysticism. This is ever the Bible way. Error is not simply denied; it is also confronted with the truth. Already one great mystery had been mentioned, that of the indwelling Christ. The practical side of this is brought out in Galatians where the inliving Christ is shown to be the governing fact of this present life of the believer. The whole problem, indeed, of the new life in Christ is to outlive Him who inlives. But here the source of all the Christian mysteries is revealed--the mystery of God Himself. The apostle applies this, first of all to the believer's walk. Mysteries belong to the

sphere of faith, not sight. We received Jesus Christ by faith on the alone authority of the Word of God. Very well: as we began so we must go on. The Christian is not a person who, having made one venture into the sphere of faith when he received the Lord Jesus, may now live by sight and sound. He is a citizen of an unseen heaven; served by the unseen messengers of an unseen Father; preserved unto an unseen inheritance; loves and serves an unseen Christ. To these great verities of revelation faith gives substance: to faith they are more real than the granite hills.

The three perils are, philosophy, the tradition (or custom) of men, and legality, a return to the law.

Against philosophy the warning is absolute. When science is in question the warning is qualified, for there is a true science. But there is no true philosophy. Philosophy is an attempt to investigate and explain the phenomena of a moral universe inhabited by morally accountable human beings, and to deduce principles for the wise and right government of life. But the Holy Scriptures are a divine and infallible revelation from God on that very subject. No men have ever thought so profoundly about the problems of life as the Greek philosophers, but their conclusions were summed up by inspiration as but "the wisdom of this world" which is mere "foolishness" with God. But the terrible effect of this "wisdom of men," this "philosophy," is that it so perverts the mind of man that the true wisdom, the "wisdom of God" seems to him mere "foolishness." That human philosophy is really foolishness is completely attested by the fact that after thousands of years it has reached no stable conclusion, the "philosophia ultima" is still an unrealized dream. One of the greatest of modern philosophers has said that over all philosophic speculation must be written the words, "Ever not quite."

In no sphere, however, has philosophy wrought such havoc as in the sphere of revealed religion. Philosophies of the plan of salvation; philosophies of the atonement; philosophies of prayer--these have abounded, and it is they which have divided Christians into warring camps. "Beware lest any man make a spoil of you through philosophy, and vain deceit."

The particular form of the philosophic peril at Colosse, Gnosticism, has passed away. Men no longer conceive of evil as lodged in matter, or seek to exonerate God from the crime of having created matter by inventing a creative creature, the "Urge" or "Demi-urge." But "religious" man is still wise above what is written, "intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind," as so-called Christian Science,² Theosophy, and a host of modern cults testify.

The third peril lay in what the Apostle calls "the rudiments [or "elements"] of the world"--a phrase which the Holy Spirit uses here and elsewhere for the law, especially the "law contained in ordinances." The Spirit in the New Testament never, it should be needless to say, makes light of the law. On the contrary it is the New Testament which especially honors the law. Not the law but the human perversion of the law by wresting it from the divine purpose-- the using of the law "unlawfully," this is what the Spirit would guard against. "The law is not made for a righteous man" may be written over Romans vi:8, and over the whole Epistle to the Galatians. The Holy Spirit does not, let it be repeated, object to the law itself, but to the law as misapplied. It is, in the divine government and education of man, an "elementary," or "rudimentary" discipline. It belongs to the age intermediate between Promise and Grace. It is a pedagogue for children who, during their minority, differ nothing from servants though heirs of all.

In beautiful harmony with this the Apostle constantly uses the law as an "instruction in righteousness" for his Gentile babes in Christ who, converted out of heathenism, are ignorant of these very "elements," or "rudiments" of righteousness.

The second peril is "the tradition of men." The Apostle has in mind here that which men have superadded to revelation. In Judaism it was that which men had added to the law. Upon the clear revelations of Exodus and Leviticus the rabbins had built a structure of intolerable oppressiveness. The Sabbath is an instance. As instituted by God it was simply and only a rest day for man and beast. Under the traditions of men it became a hard, ascetic synagogue-- keeping religious observance, under which tender consciences were tortured. To the Gospel the same evil work of man has added asceticism in all its myriad forms, all of which have one root--the notion that the stern repression of all natural joy is essential to the pleasing of the God who implanted in man's nature the capacities for those very joys. In its grosser forms Protestant Christianity has cast off the "tradition" which made it holier to be a nun than a mother; to be a monk than a father; to wear sackcloth than silk; to fast than eat. But the whole spirit of man-made "ordinances" abides, and so absolutely dominates the thinking and judgments of thousands of earnest souls that the apostolic injunction: Let, therefore, the judgment of no man govern you "in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day.. or of the Sabbath," makes a demand upon Christian manliness beyond the courage of most.

Jesus Christ was no ascetic. He was as far from Esseneism as from Pharisaism, or Herodianism, and the stricter religious opinion of His day condemned Him as a Sabbath-breaker, a glutton and wine-bibber.

Against these three abiding perils: the peril from philosophic intrusion into the sphere of revelation; of ascetic and pietistic attempts to be holy by works of which Scripture says nothing, and of putting the objects of God's free grace back under the elementary system of law, the Apostle rears great divinely revealed principles.

1. The believer is already complete in Christ. It is obvious that neither philosophy, pietism, nor legality can add to completeness. Christ "fulfilled all righteousness." Surely in behalf of the new creation, and then went to a sacrificial death in which the believer also died, and rose from the grave into a life which the believer shares. Is it a question of legal ordinances? They are nailed to the cross. It is a question of malefic "angels, principalities and powers?" Christ triumphed over them openly in the believer's behalf.

2. The second great principle is that the believer's new life is not truly nourished by legal observances or ascetic practices. Just as the branches draw all life and growth from the true Vine, so the living members in the living body of Christ grow by renewals of life from the Head. It is a total misconception of Christianity to conceive of the believer as a religionist with a series of forms and observances. He is a worshipper, but his place of worship is known only to faith, and accessible only through the Spirit. God never had pleasure in religious forms, even the forms which He commanded; they were mere shadows cast by a coming One. Now He is come, and the body of which the believer is a member is His body. How childish and trivial to suppose that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ can be pleased, or the believer benefited, by "will worship," ascetic practices, philosophical mysticisms!

3. The Apostle exposes the real origin of these: they have, to the fleshly mind "a shew of wisdom," but they but serve to exalt the flesh. Their deluded votaries, Romanist, Protestant--what not, fancy themselves holier than their brethren who seek only to yield all to the sway of the inliving One that He may live out in them the life of simplicity, naturalness, and helpfulness which He illustrated when on earth.

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Chapter III.

We reach now the preceptive part of the Epistle, the principles which are to govern the walk of a man in whom dwells Christ, who is complete in Him, and who needs neither ordinance, nor holy days, nor ascetic practices for his sanctification.

At this point many would send us back to the law. We are told on every hand that, while the law is not a means of life it still remains the rule, or as some say the standard of life. But the apostle has already told us that the law is a rudimentary discipline, and that as to ordinances, Christ nailed them to His cross. It should be a very serious matter to tear from the cross of Jesus Christ anything which He nailed to it. To man in and of the earth, having earthly promises, the law was a perfect testing. Moreover, "the law is spiritual," and searches the depths, showing man not only that he has sinned, but that he is sin; that not only does he need forgiveness, but deliverance also from a law in his members mightier than the law of his mind. For such a state nothing but death and resurrection can avail. This, for every believer, is the reckoning of God, who sees him in Christ dying, in Christ living again in newness of life.

Upon that ground, therefore, the preceptive portion of this, as of all other church epistles take the believer. "If ye then be risen with Christ." That is a word which it behooves us to learn. We may make it a touchstone by which to try every thought, every act, every motive, every plan. Is it suited to a man who was united to the Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection, and in whom Christ lives, the hope of glory?

And so the Spirit develops the principle. "If therefore ye have been raised with the Christ, seek the things above where the Christ is sitting at the right hand of God; have your mind on things above, not on the things on the earth." (Darby's Trans.)

That strikes the key-note of the new life in Christ Jesus. All of the life is to be harmonized to that. Nothing is to be allowed which would make a discord in that heavenly music. The ear of faith catches the melody of the bells upon the robe of our High Priest who has passed into the holiest, there to present the blood of our atonement, and to appear in the presence of God for us, and the whole life is to be the echo on earth of those bells in heaven.

So the Ephesians has it, only the illustration is drawn from the sister art, poesy. "For we are his poem [Gk. poiema] having been created in Christ Jesus for good works." And Peter tells us that we are to "chorus together" the graces of virtue, knowledge, temperance, brotherly love and full love.

Humiliating failure, unspirituality, unfruitfulness result inevitably from our failure to conceive of the life which we now live in the flesh as the very life of the risen Christ, which in us co-crucified and co-risen, seeks to reproduce in and through us the graces which are in Him. So long as we conceive of ourselves as men, merely, earthlings and of the earth, we will "walk as men." When we really take account of ourselves as "dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus," and therefore as truly "strangers and pilgrims on the earth," we will with purpose of heart "seek those things which are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God."

The Spirit dwells upon this great principle, that the position into which grace has brought us is to govern the walk on earth. "For ye have died, and your life is hid with the Christ in God." "Hid," as the life of the stream that makes music and brings freshness and joy in the valley is hid in the spring away yonder on the mountain. Our life is there as to its origin and its renewal. We live His life as the members of our bodies live our life; as the branch lives the life of the Vine. It is an unsevered life, one life in Him and in us.

We think of life in two ways: as a fact, and as a series of thoughts and actions. The law took man in Adam and gave him a perfect rule; grace takes man dead in trespasses and sins, and imparting to him the divine nature, and the very life of the risen Son of God, puts glory before him as his absolutely sure destiny, and exhorts that he manifest this new life in new thoughts and deeds. It is the new principle of grace: "Make the tree good, and his fruit good."

The Spirit now applies the great principle of death and resurrection to the practical details of life.

I. The man who walks in newness of life will "mortify" in the members which are upon the earth, i. e., the mortal body, the things which, in an unbeliever, bring judgment. Some of those "things" are enumerated. They are of "the works of the flesh" described in Galatians, and are the very opposites of the "fruit of the Spirit."

"Mortify" is an unflinching word. It means, "make dead." We must go to Romans for the means by which we are to "make dead" the evils most deeply rooted in fallen human nature--perversions of the sex principle, and covetousness. It is "through the Spirit," and only so, that the believer puts these things in the place of death. Self-effort is utterly vain. The Seventh of Romans is the record of a converted man, and that man no less a personage than the Apostle Paul, seeking self-victory over self, only to be utterly defeated. But the same man, instructed as to his privilege in the Spirit, finds a victory over self so quiet and complete that he can state it in three lines: "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death."

But making dead the deeds of the body, that is a walk in victory over known and specific sin, is a vastly different thing from "the entire eradication of the flesh," of which some speak. It is a phrase never found in Scripture. Two facts are ever present to the believer--the fact of "sin that dwelleth in me," and the fact that the body is the temple of the Holy Ghost "which is in you, which ye have of God." And "the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other"--to what end? "That ye may not do the [evil] things that [left to yourself] ye would."

But the shameful categories of "fornication, uncleanness, evil desire, and covetousness" are not the only things to be "put away" in the Spirit's power. Let us give heed to this. Vast numbers of Christians who walk in victory over sex sins make little of "anger, wrath, malice," etc. Evil temper in the home, the outlash of anger, or, if this be restrained, the indulgence in a cold cutting sarcasm toward children or servants--these may go with the most perfect courtesy toward strangers, or acquaintances. Alas! they may go, too, with very high doctrine, and great scrupulosity in matters of Biblical teaching.

There is to be, therefore, a thorough "putting off," and "putting on." Christ for us is justification; Christ in us is sanctification; Christ upon us is manifestation. The result will be the blessed life. "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another; in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

Lovely picture! And now, having as one may say drawn the landscape of the blessed life, the Spirit fills it with figures: "wives," "husbands," "children," "fathers," "servants," "masters," "them without." Ah! the blessed life is not, then, a vision, a fabled Atalantis, an imaginary Republic, a cloudy ideal, or, at most, an inward state. No. The blessed life is first of all a life right with God, and then a life of blessed peace and song within, and all this unto a life of practical righteousness, kindness, helpfulness and power.

The apostle finds time to call Tychicus "a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellow-servant in the Lord." One supposes that Tychicus was at many points imperfect; that Paul might have backbitten Tychicus as easily as praised him. It is always so. Two classes of facts are patent in the life of every servant of God: his shortcomings, imperfections, and failures, equally with his zeal, his prayerfulness, his real loyalty to Jesus Christ. We may dwell upon either: Paul seems to have rejoiced in the good which he saw in his brethren. One does not think that any one ever left a private interview with Paul with a bad taste in his mouth about Tychicus and Timothy--no, nor even Barnabas and John Mark!

The Epistle closes with, perhaps, the loveliest pictures of all--Epaphras on his knees in prison. We must not miss that. Epaphras had labored in the Word at Colosse. He was, probably, a "pastor and teacher" there; and there is, incidentally, a word to such: "Epaphras, who is one of you" He was not "lording it over God's heritage," but a brother-man amongst those Colossian believers. But now he is a prisoner at Rome, and can no longer teach and exhort at Colosse. Modern speech would describe him as, "providentially laid aside." Evidently he did not think so of himself, and so we have a beautiful illustration of the difference between the believer's office as a priest, an office which all believers of this age have alike, and his gift as a servant. Epaphras could no longer minister his gift, but Nero's walls could not shut him out from access to God in the holiest, and so, laying down for the time his gift, he remembers that he is a priest, and Paul could say of him: "Always laboring fervently for you in prayers." And who can doubt that Epaphras' prayers for his Colossian flock were, after all, his mightiest ministry?

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