

Parson to Person

Colossians – Part 2

Background

The letter to the Colossians and the letter to Philemon were written and delivered at the same time. Upon completion of the letter, he tasked two men to deliver it—Tychicus, a companion of Paul, and Onesimus, a recent convert who had run away and stolen from Philemon, a member of the Colossian church (Col. 4:7-9). Paul wrote the letter to Philemon as a plea to accept Onesimus, forgive his crime, and receive him as a brother.

The occasion of the letter to Philemon marks some serious social and economic disruptions. According to law, Philemon had the right to punish or even kill his runaway slave and require restitution for what was stolen. Paul's actions and his request would be seen as inappropriate at best. Onesimus was putting his life on the line, Philemon was being put on the spot, and Paul was risking hurting his sheep.

The letter to Philemon becomes important context for the letter to the Colossians. Paul encouraged the Colossians in right living as a response to the work of Jesus in their lives. The letter to Philemon and the return of Onesimus immediately puts that challenge to the test. The actions taken by Philemon would have been on the mind of all who heard the letter read.

Put Off the Old

“And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with

Him” (Col. 2:13). By Jesus’ death and the power of his resurrection, believers are raised with Christ from spiritual death. However, redeemed believers still struggle with the flesh (Rom. 7). For this reason, Paul exhorted the Colossians to “put to death your members which are on the earth” (Col. 3:2). Sexual immorality, wrath, and hateful language are typical of sinful man but have no place in the life of the believer. Because Christ has reconciled believers to Himself, believers should rid themselves of anything that is not of Christ.

Do Not Lie

At the end of his exhortation to put off the old, Paul wrote the strange statement, “Do not lie to one another...” regarding the new status of believers (Col. 3:9). The Colossians were struggling with religious meritocracy. That temptation breeds pride and self-exaltation in some and the opposite in others. If someone has merited the most, then someone else has merited the least and is treated as such. The lie Paul denounces is concerning the nature of believers in Christ. “You...have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave *nor* free, but Christ *is* all and in all” (Col. 3:9-11). In God’s economy, there is no better and no worse; all are redeemed to the same extent.

The New Man

Paul then moved his attention to the character of the new man who is modeled after Christ. Paul wrote, “But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection” (Col.

3:14). Love is the attribute that connects believers to perfection—full maturity. As a new man believers are still young and in need of growth. Jesus talked about this in John chapter three when he told Nicodemus that he must be born again. Born again believers are spiritual newborns who must now grow up. Putting off the old and putting on the new means conforming more into the likeness of Christ through maturity.

The exhortation concerning the new man is in direct opposition to the heresies addressed in chapter two. In a religion based on merit, the goal is always self. However, if Christ has forgiven all your sin and is all and in all, then the goal is much different. Christ has given everything, so the goal of the believer is a life of thankfulness. “And whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Col. 3:17).

Specific Instructions

Paul concluded his exhortation with specific instructions regarding authority-based relationships. Up to this point Paul’s letter leveled the spiritual playing field but didn’t address natural order. These final instructions address how believers put on the new man within their given roles and positions.

The first pair were wives and husbands. Wives were encouraged to be submissive, and husbands were told to love their wives. However, the husband received a second exhortation, “do not be bitter toward them” (Col. 3:19). Next, he addressed children and fathers. Children were to obey their fathers. Fathers were told not to provoke their children but with the added clause, “lest they become discouraged” (Col. 3:21).

These two groupings include instruction for both parties, but more is written to the position in authority. The authority position—husbands and fathers—is naturally exalted, so the onus is on them to take greater care for the other party.

Bondservants

Bondservants received more instruction than wives and children. They were told to obey their masters but in a specific way. Instead of trying to please their masters, they were encouraged to please the Lord. “And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ” (Col 3:23). This instruction reflects the mindset of the believing bondservant. Even in slavery, all things should be done to the glory of God.

Masters

The last instruction is for Masters. “Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven” (Col. 4:1). At first glance this can look heavy-handed, giving greater power and permission to the master. However, in the context of the letter, what is just and fair isn’t according to earthly norms, but according to Christ. Death is just and fair for sinful man, but our Master in Heaven made himself nothing on our behalf to forgive and reconcile believers to himself (Phil. 2:5-11 and Col. 1:20). Paul’s instruction to give their bondservants what is just and fair is in light of what Christ has done. As Christ forgave, so the masters should forgive.

Conclusion

The life of the new man is one of continued conformity into the likeness of Christ. This sounds wonderful, but it comes at a price. Believers are to put on Christ at the expense of their former conduct. This includes their desire to fulfill their needs and wants. Society tells us one thing, but Christ tells us another. Just as Philemon had every right to condemn Onesimus, Christ has every right to condemn us. But “even as Christ forgave you, so you must also do” (Col. 3:13b). Paul wrote to the Colossians and to Philemon pleading with them to remember the truth and to walk in it, putting off the old man and putting on the new. We all should do the same.

Love you all,
Pastor Jeff Gambrino