



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for May 9, 2010
Released on Wednesday, May 5, 2010**

"Distinguish Truth from Deceit"

Lesson Text: Colossians 2:1-10

Background Scripture: Colossians 2:1-19

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 3:14-21

Colossians 2:1-10

- 1 For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh;
- 2 That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ;
- 3 In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
- 4 And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words.
- 5 For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ.
- 6 As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him:
- 7 Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving.
- 8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.
- 9 For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.
- 10 And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to show that we must be able to distinguish truth from deceit.

Principle: to affirm that we need to be rooted and grounded in Christ and to grow in Him.

Application: to show that if we are not rooted in God's Word and in Jesus our Lord, we can easily be fooled by false teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Cults have threatened the church since its beginning, and they have taken many approaches. Some have portrayed an image of strict moral standards. Others have promised all the sensual pleasures one could desire. Some cults claim a knowledge of future events-what will happen to this world and how they will build a utopia or golden age. Others promise a better society here and now. Some follow the teachings of men or women long dead. Others follow a living charismatic individual who claims to be God or a divine spokesperson.

Whatever their differences, all cults have one thing in common, and this is what gives them their following. If cultists can convince people they lack something, they have a good chance of converting them to their cause.

In Paul's day cults were rampant in Asia Minor, where the Colossians lived. The error they faced was a mixture of ideas that offered deeper wisdom, a strict moral code, and contact with the spirit world. In this lesson we will see how Paul sought to combat it.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 60

Place: from Rome

Laodicea is a few miles from Colosse and is a growing city in this period in terms of both numbers and prosperity. Paul probably has not visited either city, for he says *many ... have not seen my face in the flesh*. His connection with Laodicea and Colosse comes from his extended stay in Ephesus, approximately A.D. 54–57 (Acts 19).

Paul understands that the churches of the two cities are in close contact and fellowship. Thus the Colossians are instructed to pass this letter along to the Laodiceans (see Colossians 4:13–16). In this letter, Paul addresses the heresy and doctrinal issues that have risen in the church.

The exact nature of the heresy is not as clear in the church at Colosse, but it seems to be connected with a false view of the nature of Christ. The city of Colosse was in a region with a rich heritage of Greek philosophy. This seems to have infiltrated the church in subtle ways and influenced the doctrine. Paul called the church back to a pure faith in Christ, a faith not mixed with paganism or philosophy.

In the Roman provinces, cities like Colosse might also have traditional gods and temples unique to their region. Each of these deities had its own priesthood and beliefs, and sometimes they were conflicting. Yet there was no pressure to make exclusive choices in religion. Perhaps the most sophisticated and mysterious of these ancient faiths was *Gnosticism*. This system emphasized the importance of esoteric knowledge.

There were several things that made Gnosticism incompatible with Christianity. Gnostics believed in many gods at many levels. Even if they eventually came to a supreme deity, this understanding of the spiritual world was at odds with the Jewish and Christian belief in a singular God.

Gnostics also made a radical division between the material world (which they believed was corrupt and evil) and the spiritual world (which they believed was the realm of truth and light). This made it inconceivable to Gnostics that the Son of God could assume a human body. The fundamentals of Gnosticism required that Jesus either be a god or a man, but not both.

Gnosticism became more organized in the second century A.D. In Paul's day, the elements of Gnosticism were just coming together, but their presence can be seen in his letter to the Colossians. Paul realized that faith in Christ and the way of Christianity was exclusive, meaning that it could not be combined with other faiths without losing its essence. There was no room for compromise.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STEADFASTNESS (Colossians 2:1-5)

Laodicea is a few miles from Colossae and is a growing city in this period in terms of both numbers and prosperity. Paul probably has not visited either city, for he says *many ... have not seen my face in the flesh*. His connection with Laodicea and Colossae comes from his extended stay in Ephesus, approximately AD 54–57 (Acts 19).

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1. How was the fervor of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles demonstrated? How was this expressed in his anxiety for the churches of Colosse and Laodicea? (Colossians 2:1)

In combating error in Colosse, Paul did not hesitate to refute it directly. More often, however, he showed his readers that they had something far better than what the cultists offered. He did this, first, by painting a magnificent picture of Jesus Christ, showing that He is supreme and sufficient in His Person and works (1:15-23). He followed this with a personal testimony of his dedication to Christ's gospel and people (vs. 24-29).

The fervor with which Paul carried out his ministry to the Gentiles drove him to unflagging toil. He had a goal of not only evangelizing them but also bringing every one of them to maturity in Christ. This extended even to Gentile believers he had never met.

Paul expressed this concern "for you, and for them at Laodicea..." (Colossians 2:1). These churches, had been nourished by the ministry of Epaphras (1:7,8). . But now they had to withstand error in order to achieve the maturity Paul desired for them, and this brought him great anxiety. He expressed this in the word "conflict," the Greek word from which we get "agony." It was often used of the striving of the athletic contest and was an apt term to describe Paul's fervent prayers for these believers. Such pressure was a daily part of his life (cf. 2 Cor. 11:28,29).

2. What was Paul's desire for the Christians he was writing to? (v. 2)

Gnosticism is built on a claim to have secret knowledge that is shared only with the elite adherents. Paul counters any such nonsense by claiming that he is glad to reveal the deepest secrets of the *mystery of God*. So, yes, Christianity also has its mysteries, but these are revealed mysteries, open secrets (Ephesians 3:4–6; Colossians 1:26; 4:3).

Paul wants each and every believer to have full *understanding* of Christian doctrine. These beliefs are the *riches* of the church, for they are the truths that give us *assurance* of salvation through Christ.

Here in verse 2, there are two things Paul desired for these Christians. First, he asked "that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love" (Col. 2:2). Comfort will come as believers are united in love, which is "the bond of perfectness" (3:14). To

combat false teaching, which thrives on disunity, believers must be joined in love and purpose. The spiritual body cannot build itself apart from this (cf. Eph. 4:14-16).

Second, Paul desired that his readers abound in spiritual insight. He wanted them to have all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding or inclusive knowledge. It is the discernment of right from wrong, true from false. This insight will bring solid confidence, even in the face of false teaching. A church unified by love and equipped by discernment can withstand any cult.

Paul assured the believers that in Christ they could enjoy full knowledge; they needed nothing the false teachers offered.

3. What did Paul mean by "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 3)?

Paul's claim is that the truths of Christianity are universal and exhaustive. In the Christian system, we have *all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*, not a mere taste. All truth is God's truth. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth (John 16:13). Christians need never fear competing truth claims or attacks that question the truth of the Christian faith. Humans will never be able to destroy truth, no matter how fierce the attack (see 2 Corinthians 13:8).

This is not to say that other religions have no truth whatsoever. There are some parallel truths (mixed with error) that may be found in Islam, in Buddhism, even in Scientology. This is particularly true of religions that have been influenced heavily by Christianity. For example, the *Book of Mormon* quotes extensively from the *King James Version* of the Bible. But the power of the consistent truth of the gospel will eventually break down every false teaching that challenges it (see 2 Corinthians 10:4, 5). Pure doctrine, the goal for which Paul works, is truth with no mixture of error (see 1 John 4:6).

4. How did the false teachers hide their logical fallacies? (v. 4)

Paul explained why he was so concerned about the Colossians and Laodiceans and why he was arguing so strenuously that all wisdom and knowledge reside in Christ. It was because there were some who would deceive them with enticing arguments. The word translated "beguile" is literally "influence by slyness." They were trying to lead them away from the truth by faulty reasoning.

The false teachers hid their faulty assumptions and logical fallacies behind persuasive arguments. They were glib talkers who sounded intelligent with their impenetrable philosophical vocabulary. In other Greek literature this expression is used of lawyers' persuasive speech by which they sway an audience toward an unjust verdict.

Paul refused to resort to these word games in his ministry, even with those who were familiar with them. He told the Corinthians that his speech and preaching were "not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). He knew that true faith must stand on the Spirit's power, not human wisdom (v. 5). This is not to minimize learning but to insist that it take its proper place under Scripture's scrutiny.

5. What caused Paul to rejoice concerning the Colossians, even while they faced error? (v. 5)

Paul's initial reports indicated that the Colossians had resisted the false teachers. This causes him great joy and hearty approval for their stand. Paul gave assurance that although he was absent from the Colossians physically, he was with them in spirit. He here assumed a more encouraging tone. In spite of slick heretics in their midst,

he rejoiced that they were still standing firm. In his mind's eye, Paul saw their "order, and the steadfastness of [their] faith in Christ." This was based on the report brought by Epaphras (1:7,8). Their mutual love had drawn them into a compact unit similar to a military phalanx. They could therefore present a unified front before the false teachers, who could find no way to plant seeds of disunity and dissatisfaction among them.

THE WAY TO STEADFASTNESS (Colossians 2:6-10)

6. How were the Colossians to build on the gospel they had received? (vs. 6,7)

As these believers had received Christ, so they were to continue to walk in Him—that is, to own Him as Lord over their spiritual development. Receiving Him involved a single act, one that took place at their conversion. But walking in Him entails continual action. He who had saved them was also the key to daily victory over sin.

Paul took up the specific aspects of steadfastness that Christ provides. He began with an organic metaphor—"rooted" (Col. 2:7). This pictures a tree putting its roots deep into the earth. "Having been rooted" catches the tense of this verb—past action with results lasting to the present.

The second verb, "built up" (Col. 2:7), draws on an architectural figure. It pictures the construction of a building. Its present tense portrays continuous action. Believers, having been rooted in Christ, now continue to grow in Him. The third verb, "stablished," is also in the present tense, showing the continuing result of being rooted and built up in Christ. Believers become more stable in the faith in which they have been instructed. They are also "abounding therein with thanksgiving," that is, overflowing with gratitude for all the provisions of Christ. Under these circumstances, there is no opportunity for false teaching to take root.

7. What are some ways you can improve your Christian walk?

We must always keep in mind that we are walking toward a destination. The walk of the Christian life means we are continually moving, not standing still. Thus we cannot afford the luxury of complacency.

The potential exists for any one of us to stumble and go astray, so we must pay attention to where we are going and help one another stay on the path. Viewing the Christian life as a walk is a perspective of humility, as it recognizes that none of us still living has completely "arrived" yet.

8. How might false teachers take Christians as plunder? (v. 8)

While nurturing their faith, Paul's readers also had to be alert. "Beware," he wrote, "lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit." The present tense of "beware" speaks of constant vigilance. In fact, "any man" may point to some smooth-tongued person in their own congregation who was attempting to lead them astray. "Spoil" is a rare Greek word, used only here in the New Testament. It means to "kidnap" or "take as plunder." Paul was warning them not to let anyone carry them away as plunder or as captives by means of philosophy and empty deception. They were not to let false teachers hold them up as a trophy and say, "Look what I have." How tragic it would be for those who had been liberated from the kingdom of darkness (1:13) to be bound again!

9. What is philosophy? Against what kind of philosophy did Paul warn?

Paul now moves to four specific items of potential heresy. First is *philosophy*, the only place this Greek term is used in the Bible (although Acts 17:18 has *philosophers* in reference to people). We still use this word today and may use it in a neutral sense. For us, philosophy is either good or bad depending on what it teaches. For Paul's context, though, philosophy has a negative sense of human wisdom that is concocted apart from God.

This is combined with *vain deceit*, meaning empty lies that are intended to mislead. Such fabulous whoppers may not even be believed by those who teach them, but they serve the teachers' purposes in devious ways (Romans 16:18; Ephesians 5:6).

Philosophy followed "the tradition of men" and "the rudiments of the world" (Col. 2:8). Tradition is merely what has been handed down from one to another. It sometimes has great value in stabilizing society, but in this case it was human thought posing as the divine answer to human needs. Christians needed to be discerning lest they be seduced by its claims.

The latter phrase can refer either to elementary principles of the world's learning or to the angelic hosts of evil linked to the physical elements of the natural world (cf. Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:20). In either case, they have no spiritual value because they are not derived from Christ. Why pursue bankrupt philosophical tradition when all treasures are in Him?

10. How does our completeness in Christ refute false teaching? (vs. 9,10)

Paul exhorts the readers to be satisfied, for we are *complete in Christ*, lacking for nothing. Because of this, we should beware of philosophy and false teaching – they are unnecessary, for God's fullness dwells in Christ alone. The term "fulness" is significant because the heretical teachers used it to describe the totality of angelic beings occupying heavenly realms and allegedly sharing the divine essence. Paul, however, declared that all this "fulness of the Godhead" dwells in Christ alone. Deity is not distributed among many angelic beings; it resides as a totality in Christ, having a permanent home in Him.

The fact that the fullness of deity dwells in Christ has practical implications for Christians, for we have been made complete in Him. Those who trust Him partake of His divine fullness (cf. John 1:16). The verb tense implies that we stand in a condition of completeness in Christ. This does not mean we become deity, but we are partakers of God's nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

This is a truth that is impossible for us to fully comprehend. Why God should take vile sinners, transform them, and make them partakers of all that His Son is baffles our imagination. Only His grace can express His motive, and only His power can explain the miracle.

Paul especially emphasized that He in whom we stand complete is the Head over all rule and authority. This speaks of all powers in the universe, including angelic ones—even those that serve Satan (cf. Rom. 8:38,39; Eph. 6:12). Christ has primacy over them because He created them (Col. 1:16) and because through His death He triumphed over them (2:15).

Cultists told the Colossians they ought to worship angels (Col. 2:18) because they shared in the divine fullness and mediated between God and men. But Paul declared that Christ is Head over all of them. Since believers are in Christ, they do not need to appease angels. We, like the Colossians, can say to all cultists, "You

have nothing to offer that can enhance my spirituality. I have all I need in Jesus Christ!"

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** We have a duty to encourage and equip other believers with God's truth (Colossians 2:1,2).
- 2.** Beware! False teachers do exist and can deceive even true believers (vs. 3,4).
- 3.** Properly complimenting the spiritual progress of others will encourage them to continue growing in Christ (v. 5).
- 4.** Obedience, faithfulness, and thankfulness are sure signs of a growing Christian (vs. 6,7).
- 5.** The philosophies of the world may be attractive, but they lead to deadly deception (v. 8).
- 6.** All true knowledge and wisdom comes from Christ (vs. 9,10).

CONCLUSION

Walking and Faith

Many people walk for exercise and enjoyment. Whether it's because the body can't tolerate more rigorous forms of exercise or just for the sheer enjoyment of the outdoors – many like to walk.

Life, in many ways, is like purposeful walking. We should know where we are going. If lost, we should ask for directions. Life should be lived deliberately, not as if floating aimlessly down a river. Just as we should know why we are walking, we should know why we are living.

The most important part, however, is to know what road we are on. The Bible promises that if we choose to walk on the road that leads to life, we have the companionship of Jesus. In fact, it is a road pioneered by Jesus, for He is the trailblazer (Hebrews 12:2). This is what Paul means when he tells the Colossians to "walk ... in him" (Colossians 2:6). How is your spiritual journey progressing these days?

PRAYER

God of truth, may we never waver in our commitment to the essentials of the gospel: that Christ died for our sins and through Him we are freed from this bondage. May we resist enticing words from false teachers and walk in Christ all of our days. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Walk determinedly with Christ.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "A Chosen Community" and emphasizes that Christians are a chosen community and should demonstrate the characteristics of Jesus. Study Colossians 3:1-25.

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