

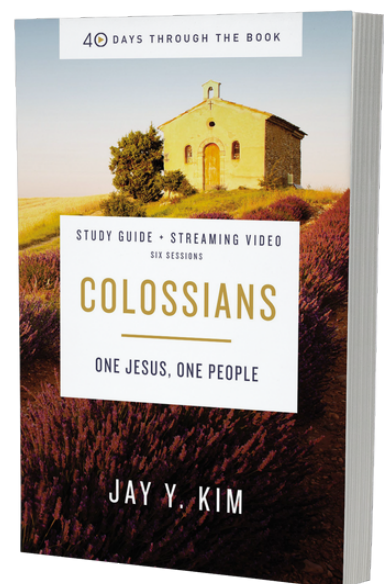
4⏮ DAYS THROUGH THE BOOK

COLOSSIANS

ONE JESUS, ONE PEOPLE

**7 sermon outlines to serve as
a course correction for
Christians in divided &
uncertain times.**

Based on Jay Y. Kim's Colossians: One
Jesus, One People video Bible study.



OVERVIEW OF COLOSSIANS



I. Introduction

In the first century, polytheism was the norm. There were many religions and countless expressions of faith. Temples built for a vast variety of gods dotted the landscape of almost every city and small town. One time, when the apostle Paul was in the city of Athens, he noticed all the places of worship. There was even an altar with the inscription, “TO AN UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:23). These people were so attentive to the pantheon of false gods that they made a place for any god they had missed or forgotten. Paul used this as a chance to point them to Jesus, Emmanuel, the One True God who came to live among us.

The book of Colossians, made up of just four short chapters, is massive when it comes to powerful teaching on the person of Jesus. Colossians 1:15–20 is one of the most concise and pointed declarations of the uniqueness of Jesus and divinity of our Lord in all the Bible. There is just one Jesus and when we know who He is, we have clear direction for our beliefs and life. If we water down the person of Jesus or add false religious or cultural beliefs, He is no longer the One Jesus. Paul was writing to correct the heretical teaching that was swirling around the church in Colossae.

Another massive challenge that existed in the first century was division among people. Like at all times in history, and in every part of the world, people can be divided because of ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, and a massive list of other things. The apostle Paul is addressing this problem among the Colossian believers. The world might be divided over these things, but Christians should not be. When Jesus is at the center of our hearts, lives, homes, churches, and community life, we are made one. Believers can say with bold confidence, “We are one people,” even when we have diverse backgrounds and differing views.

II. Teaching

Paul opens his letter to the Christians in Colossae this way: “To God’s holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.” (Colossians 1:2)

Paul’s central message to the Colossian believers is that we worship one Jesus and are part of one people (the Church). He goes on to expound this reality by presenting clear beliefs and theology in the first two chapters. It is right thinking that moves us toward Jesus and each other. In chapters three and four Paul turns our attention to right living that grows out of our beliefs. When we live according to the teachings and ways of Jesus, the world will see that we worship one Jesus as a unified people of God.

Themes in Colossians that are worthy of our focus:

A. Thanksgiving and Prayer

1. There is power in prayer. Believers pray for each other with thankful hearts. We show our unity as we ask God to help other Christians know God, live for him, bear fruit, live in power, and walk in joy (Col. 1:1-14).

2. Paul writes in Colossians 1:3-5, “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the Gospel.”

B. Fullness in Christ

1. The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.

For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.

2. Reality is not found in religion but in a relationship with Jesus and His people. There is a tendency to grasp for straws and shadows. Jesus is real, solid, and the rock on which we build our faith and life. Christians find their reality in Jesus alone and reject cheap imitations (Colossians 2:16-23).

“Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.” (Col 2:18)

Paul is addressing some people in Colossae who, at the time, were focused on religious stuff and entirely missing the point of Jesus, the real substance of faith. Paul’s letter to the Colossians makes clear that Jesus is the truest and surest foundation for life. All of our religiosity and rituals, traditions and cultural values, they’re all shadows of the reality.

C. Alive in Christ

1. There is a battle we all face. The enticements of sin invite us all to wander from Jesus and embrace the glittery and attractive things of the world. The resurrection of Jesus and His presence with us should move us from the things of the world and right into the arms of our Savior, over and over again (Colossians 3:1-11).

We put sin to death in our lives by setting our hearts, or seeking out and striving after, heavenly things. But we don’t seek out heavenly things as earthly creatures longing for ecstatic experiences. We seek out heavenly things because through His death and resurrection, Jesus has brought the possibility of heaven to us. And through His death and resurrection, Jesus invites His followers, you and me, to live resurrected lives, heavenly lives, in the here and now, on this side of eternity.

“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” (Colossians 3:3-4)

2. God offers us new “clothes.” When we come to faith in Jesus, we are called to put off our old ways, attitudes, actions—the clothes of the past. At the same time, we are moved to dress ourselves in the things of Jesus—a whole new lifestyle that fits who we are as children of God (Colossians 3:12–4:1).

The way followers of Jesus put on or wear godliness is to commit ourselves, with conviction and resolve, to the daily discipline of lining up the entirety of our lives—our will, our intentions, our motives, thoughts, words, actions—with the things of God. This is why “keeping in step” is such a powerful metaphor. A few steps in the right direction does not equate to keeping in step. Keeping in step is a consistent, step-by-step movement in the right direction. This is how our lives can and will exude compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

III. Application

We share the mystery of Christ. When we learn there is one Jesus and stand united as one people, we are moved to proclaim this life-transforming mystery of the gospel to all who will listen (Colossians 4:2–18).

The world has always been divided. Conflict seems to be hard-wired into the broken hearts and minds of sinful human beings. In Christ we find unity in the one Jesus who rules and reigns over our hearts, the Church, and the world. As Christians live in unity as one people, we set an example for the world. Peace is possible. Conflict does not have to go on endlessly. God’s people can love each other even when we face the same things that seem to divide people in our world. What an opportunity to show the world that unity is possible for those who know, love, and follow Jesus!

THE TRUE CENTER

COLOSSIANS 1:1-29



A. Introduction

Author Jay Kim shared the following: “On June 12th, 1633, the Roman Catholic Church charged a man with heresy. The statement of indictment accused this man of having ‘believed and held the doctrine, which is false and contrary to the Holy and Divine Scriptures, that the sun is the center of the world, and that it does not move from east to west, and that the earth does move, and is not the center of the world.’”

The man charged was the 17th century philosopher and astronomer Galileo, and he was being accused of what we call heliocentrism—the belief that the sun is at the center of our solar system. At the time, the assumption was that the earth was the center of the universe, and to believe otherwise was egregious and scandalous, not just socially but religiously.

We know better now, at least about the sun. But the human tendency to place ourselves at the center of all things rages on. We might intellectually believe otherwise but most of us live life, day by day, moment by moment, as if life orbits, or at least, ought to orbit around us.

Even for many of us who are followers of Jesus, we’ve bought into the subtle and insidious cultural myth of individualism—the idea that we can have what we want, when we want, how we want, and that the path to a meaningful life is a path we forge ourselves by patchworking together our specific and particular preferences, perspectives, and desires.

But two millennia ago, Jesus himself refuted this idea and made a dramatically different claim. In John 14:6, he declares, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

II. Teaching

In the past two thousand years, countless words have been written about Jesus, but one of the very first people to ever write about him was a man named Paul. Colossians was originally a letter written by Paul to the early Christians in an ancient first century city called Colossae.

It's important to know that Colossae was a diverse city, where Jews and Gentiles lived side by side and this ethnic diversity resulted in religious diversity. Judaism co-existed alongside a variety of local religions as well as many of the major cult religions of the Roman Empire, each offering their own unique sets of values and beliefs. The first Christians in Colossae found themselves floundering, as they tried to navigate what it meant to follow Christ amidst the muddled mishmash of religious syncretism.

A. What is Syncretism?

In short, syncretism is the fusion of different values, beliefs, and practices, from a diverse range of cultural and religious traditions. The Colossian Christians were struggling with this when it came to the way they believed and, more importantly, practically lived out the teachings of Jesus as they forged this new faith community together. So, one of Paul's primary purposes in writing this letter was to teach and course-correct these early Christians away from a certain religiously syncretistic "philosophy" that had arisen in their midst. This philosophy, or heresy, was opposed to not only the true identity and reality of who Jesus actually is, but also what that meant for these early Christians as they lived and followed the way of Jesus in their everyday lives.

Scholars today often call this the "Colossian heresy." Now, there is some debate amongst scholars about what exactly this Colossian heresy may have been. Some scholars say it may have been an early form of Gnosticism. Others say it was some sort of mystery cult, while still others say that it was actually a form of fringe Judaism. But there is agreement across the board that the Colossian heresy was a syncretistic philosophy—again, a way of thinking and living that blended a wide variety of religious ideas.

B. Modern Syncretism

Now, when you and I as modern people hear this sort of backstory to a letter like Colossians, we're tempted to think, "Well, that was then, this is now. We don't deal with those sorts of issues." Most of us think that Christianity is fairly cut and dry. But when we dig beneath the surface, we discover that we face a similar crisis of syncretism today. Even for those of us who are followers of Jesus, it is becoming increasingly common and easy to meld a wide variety of beliefs, values, perspectives, and ethics alongside our own understanding of what it actually means to follow Jesus. And before we know it, our faith becomes, as it did in Colossae, syncretistic. It devolves from the faith that Jesus Himself embodied and taught and called us to live, into some other murky, diluted, watered down version that's been influenced and infiltrated by a variety of cultural ideologies.

We see this with the cultural value of materialism and the way it's given rise to what many call the health and wealth gospel, the subtle and attractive false belief that being a Christian means a life of perfect health and abundant wealth. It's the myth that the moment we say yes to Jesus all of our problems will go away. The bills get paid, the ailments disappear; you meet the right spouse, and you have the right kids, and you buy the right car, and have the right job—or whatever else your heart may desire.

We also see this sort of modern syncretism in the rise of individualism, the grave misunderstanding that following Jesus is a completely private affair; that Christianity is about God and me and nothing and no one else. This sort of syncretism leads to a Christianity that's focused solely on getting my personal golden ticket to Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, the place Christians call heaven. And as a result, we forget that Jesus calls us to live as a community; that He saves us not just into heaven but that He saves us into a family of brothers and sisters who come alongside one another and live as one. We even see this modern-day syncretism with the way nationalism has divided our allegiance. We find ourselves pledging our deepest allegiances to flag and country and specific political parties or candidates, above and beyond our allegiance to Jesus as King.

We've mashed together our identity as Americans with our identity as Christians. Listen, I am grateful to be an American, but as a Christian, my primary allegiance is to Christ and Christ alone. As Paul himself reminds us in Philippians 3:20, followers of Jesus are first and foremost citizens of heaven.

C. The Danger of Syncretism

One of the great dangers of syncretism is that it often leads us down the path toward idolatry. When we lose sight of the pure essence of the faith Christ calls us to and dilute it into something that it wasn't meant to be, we're creating a faith shaped by our own preferences, perspectives, and desires. Knowingly or unknowingly, we make ourselves the center of our own little universe and begin to expect that Christ will orbit around us. This often leads to a formational journey which leaves us shaped far more by the fickle tides of culture than the timeless truths of God himself.

This path toward idolatry is most often subtle, which makes it all the more insidious. In his book *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller puts it this way: "We think that idols are bad things but that is almost never the case... Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the best things in life... whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power, the person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives."

So, one of the key questions that Colossians confronts us with is this: Do we believe that Christ is actually Lord? Do we believe that He alone is at the center of it, the sun around which our lives and the human story itself orbit?

One of the most fascinating things about Jesus is that most people lose influence as the years pass on after their death. But Jesus Christ is the singular example in human history of reversing that trajectory. His life's impact was greater 100 years after His death than it was when He was alive, even more so 500 years later when an entire empire was shaped by His life and teachings, and even more so 1,000 years later. And today, 2,000 years after His resurrection and ascension, Jesus has more followers around the world than ever before. He is undeniably history's most central figure.

III. Application

When sin has us spinning out of orbit, Christ is the firstborn Son who bridges the gap between our brokenness and God's blessing. When the allure of temptation leads us astray, Christ is the firstborn Son who pulls us back toward the family of God by way of grace and love.

When our faith becomes watered down by the various trappings of culture which seep into us through the dark tunnels of our deceitful desires, Christ is the firstborn Son who shines light into that darkness, piercing the lies with profound truth.

Following Jesus means to see past the thin veneer of the various ideologies and cultural blips that pose as gospel, to unshackle ourselves from our enslavement to materialism, individualism, nationalism, or whatever else it might be that we're conflating with true Christian faith, and to see Christ and Christ alone. To fix our eyes on Jesus. To admit and embrace the reality that He is at the center and we are not. And to find our greatest comfort and deepest joy in knowing that He holds it all together.

BROKEN GAUGES

COLOSSIANS 2:1-15



I. Introduction

One summer while Jay Kim was in college, he and some friends planned a trip to Los Angeles, which was about a six hour drive south of where they lived. He shares: “We decided to drive my friend Danny’s car because it was the “newest” of all our cars; I use air quotes because this isn’t saying much. All of our cars were beyond beat up and his just happened to be the least beat up of the bunch. We took turns driving and I happened to be behind the wheel when we got to the Grapevine. The Grapevine is a five-miles long stretch of highway just north of LA that ascends at a 6% grade until it reaches about 1600 feet at its peak. There are signs all over the place as you enter the Grapevine, reminding drivers to turn off their air conditioning, because driving such a steep grade puts added strain on the engine which often causes overheating.

But the fact that we were making this drive in the heat of a California summer coupled with the fact that we were irresponsible college kids was a recipe for disaster. As I began the slow climb up with the AC blasting, I made sure to keep my eye on the temperature gauge and everything looked fine. The temperature was holding steady and we were on our way when all of a sudden... smoke. Thick, black smoke begins billowing out of the engine. It turns out, the gauges on Danny’s car were broken. I thought I had a solid understanding of what was happening under the hood of the car, but because the gauges were broken, the head gasket was blown, I was leaking coolant, burning up the engine, and I had no idea until it was too late.”

Broken gauges lead to disaster. They mislead and misguide us.

Broken gauges tell us we’re in great shape when in fact we’re on the verge of breakdown.

Broken gauges tell us we’re running on full when in fact we’re running on empty.

II. Teaching

Paul's brilliance is on full display in Colossians 2:1-4 in the way that he juxtaposes full riches and complete understanding over and against deception by fine-sounding arguments. "I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments." (Colossians 2:1-4)

One of Paul's primary reasons for writing this letter to the Colossian Christians was to warn them against a certain misguided philosophy, often called the Colossian heresy by scholars today. The Colossian heresy was essentially a broken gauge, deceiving the early Christians into believing that they were living into the fullness of the Christian life when in fact, they were living on empty.

A. The Modern Problem

This isn't just an ancient problem; it's a modern problem. Especially in the digital age, as we find ourselves feasting on a diet of social media and news media feeds, overwhelmed and nauseated by information overload, we are susceptible, whether we know it or not, to broken gauges—to crafting and then trusting our own versions of faith, shaped and informed more by culture than by Christ.

Our digital feeds are bombarding us with "fine-sounding arguments," in the words of Paul. And these fine-sounding arguments often deceive us, leading to broken gauges, pushing us closer and closer to the edge of breakdown, until eventually, we see thick, black smoke billowing out of our lives. We think we're consuming content, but in reality, in the digital age, the content is consuming us. Long before the Internet, Paul was well aware of this dangerous dynamic. He implores us:

"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ." (Col. 2:8)

The word “captive” is an aggressive and even violent word in the original Greek; it means “to steal” or “to kidnap.” It was a word most commonly used in the language of war. Paul is offering a sobering picture of the battle we face on a daily basis—there is a war being waged for our attention, affection, and allegiance. Just as the early Christians in Colossae had been taken captive by the syncretistic beliefs of their day, today, our attentions, affections, and allegiances have been stolen and kidnapped by a wide variety of popular opinion and social commentary.

B.The Solution

Thankfully, there is a way to free ourselves from this captivity. Let’s return once more to the beginning of the passage, Colossians 2:2-4. Paul writes:

“My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

The wisdom and knowledge we find in Christ are so much more than mere opinion or commentary, more than just data or information. While the world is embroiled in chaos, uproar, and outrage, wisdom is a resolute and non-anxious strength of character to act in accordance with right knowledge. In James, chapter 3, we read:

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom....But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. (James 3:13,17)

We see here that wisdom and understanding, or knowledge, stand in almost diametrical opposition to the cultural ethos of the digital age.

Humility, Purity, Peace, Considerate, Submissive, Merciful, Full of Good Fruit, Impartial, Sincere.

But the challenge is that most of us feel too deeply entangled in endless loops of information overload and on most days, most of us find ourselves scrolling, swiping, and clicking our way away from wisdom and knowledge and toward opinion and commentary... away from things like humility and peace, and toward things like pride and outrage. But we don't have to keep on this path.

Paul reminds us:

“In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.” (Col 2:9-10)

As enslaved as we may feel to the fickle cultural tides of our day—the various opinions and commentaries painting whatever narrative they so choose—the actual truth is that Christ rules and reigns over it all. And all the wisdom and knowledge we need to not only make it but to actually flourish in this life and on into the next, is found in Him.

Paul makes clear that this is possible because Christ, “forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.” (Col 2:13-14)

In essence, Jesus' death and resurrection have changed everything. We are no longer bound by human traditions. We recall here Paul's earlier words in verse 8, that we be mindful to not be taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depend on human tradition. This isn't to say that traditions are bad. But it is to say that even the best of our traditions are but shadows, pointing us to a much more significant and far more beautiful reality.

III. Application

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” (Col 2:6-7)

About once a month, Jay Kim gathers at a park near his house with young families from the church. Dozens of kids run around laughing, falling, and making an absolute mess of themselves. It's joyous chaos. Right in the middle of this park stands a tall oak tree, perfect for climbing. Each and every time they gather at this park, despite the multiple playgrounds, the tree is the main event. The kids do their best to make their way up its broad trunk and out onto its sturdy branches. Not once has Jay Kim and the other adults worried about this tree falling over. No matter how many little boys and girls are climbing, the thought has never crossed their minds. Why? Because this tree is rooted, built up, and strong.

The Christian life at its best is like this oak tree. Rooted. Built up. Strengthened. The word "rooted," in the original language of the text, is in a particular verb form that indicates once-for-all action. It essentially means, "You were once rooted, and remain rooted, now and forever."

The phrase "built up," is a single word in the Greek, in a verb form indicating that something is happening now in the present and will continue to happen into the future. "You are being built up now and you will continue to be built up as you move forward in life."

The word "strengthened" is a word that can also be translated as "established" or "stable." Rooted. Built up. Strengthened.

When the broken gauges of cultural opinions and commentaries lead us astray and we're floundering in the chaos and confusion of the cultural tides, in Christ, we find our footing. In Him we find stable ground, steady and sure, unwavering, unmoving, always guiding us in the right direction.

A GREATER REALITY

COLOSSIANS 2:16-23



I. Introduction

About 400 years before the birth of Christ, the Greek philosopher Plato published a work called *Republic*, which is both his most well-known work and one of history's most influential philosophical works. In it, Plato includes a fictional dialogue between his mentor Socrates and his brother Glaucon. The dialogue has come to be known as *The Allegory of the Cave*.

The Allegory of the Cave describes a group of people who've lived their entire lives, you guessed it, in a cave. They're prisoners who've spent the entirety of their existence staring at a wall. Behind these prisoners, away from view, is a fire. And between the fire and the prisoners are other people, holding up puppets and other objects, casting shadows against the wall. The prisoners, all they can see are the shadows on the wall. The shadows are their reality. But Socrates suggests that if some of these prisoners were to free themselves from their bondage, escape the cave out into the bright, sunlit world, they'd come to realize that there is a far greater reality beyond the cave. They'd come to realize that the shadows are not reality.

II. Teaching

Paul writes in Colossians 2:16-17, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

There's a lot going on here. First, the word "therefore" clues us in that whatever came before this matters. The preceding verse, Colossians 2:15, reads, "having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

So, why does Paul believe that the religious festivals, New Moon celebrations, and even Sabbath days are all simply a shadow of the reality of Christ?

Because Christ has disarmed the powers and authorities of this world and triumphed by going to the cross. In dying, and then resurrecting, Jesus announces Himself as the true King of the universe. Christ's crucifixion is in many ways His coronation. He is the center of it all, the sun around which all of life orbits.

A. Shadows of Things to Come

Notice that Paul doesn't oppose or do away with these religious traditions. He simply puts them in their rightful place. He recognizes them as shadows that were pointing to the reality all along.

This is Paul's point. The festivals. The celebrations. The rituals. The traditions. They're all shadows pointing to a greater, truer reality, which is Christ Himself.

Today our songs, our sermons, reciting the right verses, praying the right prayers—all of the motions we go through—these things are good and helpful and even necessary, when they're in their right place. But when we forget that they are shadows pointing us to the reality of Christ, we become like the prisoners in Plato's cave—chained and bound to rules, regulations, and rituals, instead of experiencing and living in the freedom of reality, the freedom we have in Jesus.

Hebrews 10:1 echoes this truth, "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves."

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, there are more than 600 hundred commands, or "laws." It would be impossible to perfectly observe and live by each of those laws every waking moment of one's life. And that was the entire point! The law was intended to make it obvious that there was no way, in and of ourselves, to live up to God's standards for holiness. Which leads of course to our desperate need for Jesus.

B. Shadows and Stuff

Christ did not come to abolish, but rather, to fulfill, the law. In the same way, religious rituals and practices are not abolished by Christ; they simply exist to point the way to Christ; shadows revealing reality.

In Colossians 2:17, when Paul says that the reality is found in Christ. If we aren't clear about the difference between the shadows and reality, we run the risk of getting caught up in the stuff of religion but entirely missing the substance of Christianity. This is exactly what happened in Colossae.

In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul writes, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?"

The moment we give our lives to Christ, the Holy Spirit makes His home in us. Not an Airbnb or VRBO. Not a hotel. Home. The Holy Spirit doesn't visit us from time to time. The Holy Spirit resides in us. Sometimes His miracles in our lives are expressed in surprising, shocking, supernatural ways. But more often than not, His miracles are expressed with way more subtlety. But they are miracles nonetheless.

For the Christian, every breath we take is a reminder of the Holy Spirit in us and this is an extraordinary gift. But often we're so busy searching for the ecstatic that we miss the extraordinary right in front of us.

The allure of shadows and stuff is strong. But when they become priorities, over and above the reality and substance that is Christ himself, it's like a body trying to survive without a head. Paul says as much in verse 19.

"They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow."

C. The Greater Reality

Our religious traditions and rituals are like the body. They're a complex system of practices, disciplines, and liturgies intended to form in us the rhythms of resurrection life and transform us, little by little, into the likeness of the resurrected Christ. But it all begins with the head, the cornerstone, the foundation upon which everything else is built. Jesus Christ, our reality and our substance.

Then, Paul concludes Colossians 2 this way:

“Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules?” (Col 2:20)

Paul’s point is clear. In Jesus, the “elemental spiritual forces of this world” no longer have power over us, in any way.

If they are the shadow, Jesus is the reality.

If they are the stuff, He is the substance.

III. Application

Paul’s letter to the Colossians makes clear that Jesus is the truest and surest foundation for life. All of our religiosity and rituals, traditions and cultural values, they’re all shadows of the reality. Dallas Willard reminds us that, “Everything else in this universe is created and is perishing. It is dependent on something greater than itself for its existence. This points to a being who is both the source of everything else that exists and is totally self-sufficient. This being is so grand that it is easier for him to exist than not to exist. He is one who, out of his mere nature, pours forth life in infinite quantities that are incomprehensible, everlasting, unceasing, and will never be exhausted.”

In another one of his letters, Paul writes that we are, “no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:19-22)

When Christ is our foundation and our cornerstone, the substance upon which we build our lives, foreigners become citizens and strangers become family. The old boundary lines of cultural norms, traditions, and rituals are redrawn and expanded. And in Christ, we are built together into the Temple, the place where heaven meets earth and God Himself dwells.

CONSTANT DISSONANCE

COLOSSIANS 3:1-11

I. Introduction

Jay Kim shares the following example: “I’m not much of a “sweets” or “desserts” guy but I do have a weakness for milkshakes. I don’t drink many milkshakes these days but, true confession, any time I see one on a menu, the temptation looms large. But the American Heart Association recommends that the maximum amount of added sugar you should have in a day is between 25-35 grams. A large milkshake, on average, has almost 100 grams of added sugar. Milkshakes have no nutritional value. In fact, they’re a net negative, healthwise. They’re actually bad for me, physically.” Kim knows all of this and yet, he has to muster an immense amount of discipline to not drink his favorite milkshake.

Often in life, knowledge and belief aren’t enough. We may know and believe that a particular thing is true, but then, we find ourselves living our actual lives in opposition to that knowledge and belief. Paul himself writes in Romans 7:15, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.”

In the big grand scheme of things, milkshakes are fairly harmless. But this same dynamic is at play in far more consequential and, sometimes, destructive ways. There are longings and desires in all of us, which often overwhelm and overcome our knowledge and our beliefs. James Smith describes it this way in *You Are What You Love*:

“Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow... [what] we live toward is not something that we primarily know or believe or think about; rather, [it’s] what we want, what we long for, what we crave.”

Most of us live with a constant dissonance between what we know and what we long for. As much as we might believe otherwise, the reality of human experience tells us that the gap between our knowledge and our desires is wide, and often, widening.

II. Teaching

Now, in light of that, let's read Paul's challenging words in Colossians 3:5-10...

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

As harsh as some of these vices sound, they're very present realities, in some form or fashion, in most of our lives.

- Sexual immorality, impurity, lust.
- Evil desires and greed.
- Anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language.
- Deceit.

Let the discomfort sink in for a bit. I know it's awkward. But recognizing and admitting the very real presence of these sinful traits in our lives is actually the first step toward wholeness and renewal.

Paul begins this section by imploring us to “put to death” this brokenness in our lives. That phrase, “put to death” is a single Greek word and it's pretty rare in the New Testament, found only two other times. It's a word that means something along the lines of, “turning into a corpse.” It's actually a graphic word, describing something once alive now decomposing toward death. This is important. The work of putting sin to death begins by recognizing that sin was and is still quite alive. And what this means is that we must be ready to embark on the painful and difficult work of actually putting a living thing down. Nijay Gupta in his commentary on Colossians puts it this way:

“The death and burial of the believer pronounces a kind of termination to something from before. The new life bursts forth from the grave of condemned trespasses, and this bursting forth must be directed and nurtured.”

Gupta distinguishes the two sets of sinful vices that Paul lists in a really helpful way. He says that the first list—sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed—are sins of exploitation; and that the second list—anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying—are sins of abuse.

1. Sins of Exploitation

These are sinful acts in which we use the body and life of another person to gratify ourselves. And there's a reason why Paul puts greed at the very end and calls it idolatry. Greed is in some ways the catch-all sin, describing the dynamic at play in all of the other sins listed previously. The theologian David Garland (Colossians, Philemon, NIVAC) describes it this way:

“Greed refers to the haughty and ruthless belief that everything, including other persons, exists for one's own personal amusement and purposes. Essentially it turns our own desires into idols. It is the overweening desire to possess more and more things and to run roughshod over other persons to get them. [...] Greed can crave after persons and is never satiated by its conquests but always lusts for more.”

This is what sexual sin boils down to, whether an addiction to pornography or reckless promiscuity or adultery in marriage. It's greed becoming an idol we worship, where we justify the sacrifice of others, their bodies, their dignity, their well-being, in order to gratify ourselves.

2. Sins of Abuse

Then, there are sins of abuse. These are outward-facing actions that break down and destroy other people: anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying.

It might sound severe to say these things might actually abuse, break down, and destroy other people but, the fact is, they do. We minimize these sins not because they lack severity but because they're so alarmingly common in our lives; and to reckon with the actual breadth and depth of their destructive potential is frightening and sobering... so, we minimize. But remember, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lying are serious enough that Paul tells us to “put them to death.”

3. Our Responsibility

We must at once put these sins to death. Whenever temptation comes our way, we are always faced with a choice—to give life to it or to put it to death. Giving it life is easier and almost always more gratifying in the moment. But if we don't kill sin, it will kill us. It will kill our integrity, our peace, our relationships, and our joy. If you let it, sin will kill your soul. So... how do we do this? How do we become the sorts of people who have the strength and the resolve to stand our ground when temptation comes our way, when sin comes knocking at our door?

The very beginning of Colossians 3 shows us the way. Paul writes:

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

When Paul encourages us to “set our hearts on things above,” he is saying, seek out and strive after things above, heavenly things, the things of God.

We put sin to death in our lives by setting our hearts, or seeking out and striving after, heavenly things. But we don't seek out heavenly things as earthly creatures longing for ecstatic experiences. We seek out heavenly things because through His death and resurrection, Jesus has brought the possibility of heaven to us. And through His death and resurrection, Jesus invites His followers, you and me, to live resurrected lives, heavenly lives, in the here and now, on this side of eternity.

III. Application

Those who follow Christ are to live as men and women who embody and express to a broken world the way things should and eventually will be.

If and when we embrace, embody, and express this reality in our lives, then we stand more than a chance of putting sin to death. With the Spirit of God moving in and through us, as hard as it may seem, living the renewed, resurrected life in the here and now is absolutely possible. Putting the various sins of exploitation and sins of abuse in our lives to death is absolutely doable. But it can't be done with just good intentions and it can't be done alone. It takes discipline and it takes community.

In Colossians 3:16, Paul writes this:

“Let the message of Christ dwell richly among you...”

This is what you are doing right now by giving your time and energy to diving deeply into Scripture. For most Christians, our Bibles are simply ornamental. They sit on our bookshelves and nightstands, collecting dust. But the message of Christ, revealed to us most accessibly and powerfully through Scripture, is supposed to dwell richly in us, if we are going to put sin to death in our lives. Regular and consistent time in Scripture is a non-negotiable if we want to live the resurrected life. The only way to rid our hearts and minds of the sinful thoughts, longings, and desires that so often take up space there is to fill that space with something else; to fill it with the message of Christ, God's Word.

THE RIGHT ATTIRE

COLOSSIANS 3:12-4:1

I. Introduction

Paul writes in Colossians 3:12-14:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Historians believe that at the time of Paul, much of the economy of the city of Colossae was built on wool manufacturing and the clothing industry. So Paul’s metaphor to “clothe yourselves” and “put on love” was uniquely fitting for the Colossian Christians. But it’s relatable for all of us. We’ve all experienced the relief and joy that comes from taking off the wrong clothes and putting on the right ones.

Author Jay Kim was asked to officiate a wedding and tells the following story:

“I wanted to drive comfortably so I wore a t-shirt, basketball shorts, and sandals. And of course, I had my suit in the back and the plan was to change at the venue.

So I arrive at the venue, about an hour before the ceremony, reach into the back of my car to grab my suit, and then... horror. My shirt and tie are there. My shoes and socks are there. My jacket is there. But my trousers are nowhere to be found.

Panic sets in. I’ve got 45 minutes until the ceremony now, not even close to enough time to drive home and get a pair of pants. Remember, I’m wearing basketball shorts, not a good look for a wedding. I’m tearing my car apart looking for these pants, hoping and praying to God that I don’t ruin this wedding by having to stand up there, looking like clergy on top and unacceptably casual on bottom.

I'm at a loss and starting to lose it. Then, I remember that I've got a friend who lives nearby, about the same height and build as me. I call him. Ten minutes later, I'm at his house and he hands me a pair of trousers. I put them on as quickly as possible, rush back to the venue, and officiate the wedding. Crisis just barely averted. “

II. Teaching

Paul writes in Colossians 3:12-14:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

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A. The Wrong Attire

Colossians 3, where Paul makes clear what ill-fitting attire is for followers of Jesus: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lies (Col 3:6-8). This is the stuff we’re supposed to take off, so to speak. For Christians, wearing these attributes should feel like showing up to a wedding in basketball shorts. Paul actually uses even stronger language—he instructs us to put them to death.

B. The Right Attire

In place of the wrong attire, we are to put on: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and above all, love (Col 3:12-14).

These attributes reflect much of Paul’s words in the famous Galatians 5, “Fruit of the Spirit” passage:

1But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” (Galatians 5:22-26)

Here, Paul tells us the specific way to wear these attributes of God’s Spirit in our lives. Verse 25, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” In the original Greek, the word translated as the phrase “keep in step” was a military term. It was used to describe when soldiers would stand side by side and draw up a line of defense. In the Greco-Roman world of Paul, the word was also used by Greek philosophers to describe when a person would line up their lives with the specific teaching of a particular philosophy. It’s a word describing disciplined conformity to a particular way of life; not conformity that leads to a loss of freedom and autonomy but rather, life-giving conformity to a set of standards built upon a purpose and identity greater than our often selfish and misguided individual longings and desires.

C. Wearing the Things of God

There’s no easy way around this. The way followers of Jesus put on or wear godliness is to commit ourselves, with conviction and resolve, to the daily discipline of lining up the entirety of our lives—our will, our intentions, our motives, thoughts, words, actions—with the things of God. This is why “keeping in step” is such a powerful metaphor. A few steps in the right direction does not equate to keeping in step. Keeping in step is a consistent, step-by-step movement in the right direction. This is how our lives can and will exude compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

Then, Paul continues in Colossians 3:15-17:

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

The peace Paul's talking about here is an outward extension of his earlier call to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love. Remember, these are all outward facing expressions of God's transformative power and grace in our lives. They exist only inasmuch as we extend them to those around us. And when we do, peace is the result. Specifically, it is the peace of Christ himself which binds us together. This is what happens when Christians put on and wear the things of God. The peace of Christ begins to unite us and everything between us—all of our differences and disagreements, our political leanings and various opinions on various topics—while they do not go away or grow any less complex, they will recede into the background, as the peace of Christ brings us together, as unlikely and incompatible as we may be. This is why peace is such a big deal for Paul. In fact, when he writes, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts," (v.15), the word "rule" is a Greek word that means "to arbitrate." It was a legal word used to describe a judge's ruling in court. In other words, Paul is saying, God has made His decision, He's given His ruling and His ruling is this—the peace of Christ is to rule in our hearts. Again, not our differences or divisions, not our politics or opinions—but the peace of Christ.

III. Application

Listen this is a difficult and challenging call. It probably seems next to impossible if we're being honest. But this is our calling. The way toward living out this call to peace is actually simple. Not easy, but simple. Paul writes, in Colossians 3:16:

"Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."

This is about the worshiping life of the Church. The Church is the body of Christ, his people, gathered and bound up as one. When we sing, we don't sing as a random collection of individuals. We sing praises to God, together, because it shapes and forms us, together. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is helpful here. He writes,

"It is the voice of the church that is heard in singing together. It is not I who sing but the church. However, as a member of the church, I may share in its song. Thus all true singing together must serve to widen our spiritual horizon. It must enable us to recognize our small community as a member of the great Christian church on earth and must help us willingly and joyfully to take our place in the song of the church with our singing, be it feeble or good."

Then, Paul ties it all together by saying, "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Whatever you do, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus. Think about that. Whatever you do.



GOD ALONE

COLOSSIANS 4:2-18

I. Introduction

Who is your spiritual hero? For author, Jay Kim that person is his mom. He explains, “I grew up with a single mom and to this day, my mother is my hero. She’s hands down the most passionate follower of Jesus I know. I don’t have any siblings so our house was a quiet place growing up. But I remember the sound of my mother’s prayers disrupting the silence early every morning and late every night. She always worked two or three jobs at a time to make ends meet but still, she somehow found the time and energy to devote herself in that way. When I ask her about it now, she tells me with clarity and conviction in her voice that she prayed, and continues to pray, that way because for her, there was nothing and no one else to rely on but God himself. Her desperation led to devotion.”

II. Teaching

Paul begins the final chapter of his letter to the Colossians like this, he writes: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” (Colossians 4:2)

“Devote yourselves.” The word “devote” in the original Greek is a word that basically means, “to work with intense effort toward something, even when it’s difficult.” Many of us think of prayer as a calm, restful lingering in God’s presence. And it is. Prayer as an effortless abiding in the presence of God is a wonderful gift and a powerful practice to incorporate into the daily rhythms of our lives.

Sometimes, prayer is devotion. It’s an “on-your-knees, pleading and crying out in desperation” sort of endeavor. Sometimes, prayer is “intense effort, even when it’s difficult.”

Paul implores the Colossian Christians to devote themselves to prayer. He writes this:

“Pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.”
(Colossians 4:3-4)

Paul’s desire is to shine the light of Jesus into a dark world. This was Paul’s prayer and it must become our prayer today.

Most of us know the words of Jesus found in Matthew 28, that we commonly call The Great Commission:

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”
(Matthew 28:19-20)

This is why we’re still here—to “go and make disciples,” students, apprentices, practitioners of the way of Jesus. And to baptize them into the family of God and teach, or proclaim, the Gospel. For Christians, this is the central motivation for life on this side of eternity. Again, this is why Paul asks the Colossian Christians to devote themselves to prayer, to pray with intense effort—specifically so that he might continue the work of proclaiming the Gospel. It mattered more than anything to Paul, and it should matter more than anything to us. We should be totally devoted to God alone. We should be telling others about what God has done in our lives. We should be sharing Jesus with everyone.

Then, Paul continues by giving us a practical roadmap for how to join in this work:

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Colossians 4:5-6)

In the ancient world, “salty speech” was a common metaphor for speaking in a way that was intriguing or compelling for the listener. Paul’s encouragement here is to make the most of our opportunities to share the Good News of Jesus by being gracious, intriguing, and compelling.

Sadly, so many “Christians” today, especially online, seem to be taking a polar opposite approach. Instead of gracious, salty speech, much of Christian rhetoric today comes across as angry and bitter. This must change. And for this to change, we have to realize and embrace that we are all on level ground; we’re all broken and flawed human beings saved by grace; once enslaved to sin, now freed by the grace of God and bound up together as the one family of God.

In his letter to the Galatian Christians, Paul writes this:

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
(Galatians 3:26-28)

Neither slave nor free. We are all one. This is where God has taken and is continuing to take the story. This is why Paul refers to Tychicus and himself as “co-slaves,” while he calls Onesimus a “faithful and dear brother, who is one of you.”

In the book of Philemon, we discover that Onesimus was once a slave in Philemon’s household. But he runs away. Most scholars believe that Onesimus fled not because he was mistreated but because he’d done something wrong. While on the run, Onesimus meets Paul and encounters Christ in a transformative way and becomes a Christian. And now, Paul is sending Onesimus back to Colossae, which means he’s sending him back to Philemon.

Presumably, lots of people in Colossae would’ve known about Onesimus’ wrongdoing. They would’ve known he was the slave who ran away. And here’s Paul, one of the key leaders of the Christian movement, calling himself a slave and calling Onesimus a faithful and dear brother, who is one of you.

Paul is leveling the playing field. In fact, in his letter to Philemon, Paul makes the point even more abundantly clear. He writes,

“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.” (Philemon 15-17)

Paul is saying, “Philemon, you have Onesimus back now, but not for a contracted set of years; you have him back forever. And not forever as a slave or servant. He is your brother now. Welcome him as you would welcome me.”

This is what happens in the kingdom of God.

With Jesus alone, the many are made one.

With Jesus alone, slaves and masters become brothers and sisters.

With Jesus alone, enemies become friends, and friends become family.

III. Application

So what does this mean for us today?

This means that as we reckon with growing discord and hostility, both within and outside of the church and as outrage culture beckons us to vilify, demonize, and crucify the other, followers of Jesus stand in resilience and resistance to the cultural tides of the day which seek to divide us.

We choose grace, peace, and love. We act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly. We mourn with those who mourn, even when they don’t look, sound, or think like us, even when their stories are nothing like our stories, even when their pain is nothing like our pain.

It means that though the color of our skin may differ, our politics may differ, our opinions may differ, our perspectives, stories, hopes, dreams, anxieties, and fears may differ—God alone is our common link.

We stand alongside one another in love, for we are all one in Jesus Christ our King—Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male, female, every ethnicity, every story, any and all who say yes to Jesus.

We are all one in Christ.