

“Sanctification by Faith”
Colossians 2:6-15
October 16, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

We come today to two verses that are the theme of Paul’s teaching in this letter. **“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”** Paul is telling the Colossians that their Christian walk is accomplished simply by continuing to do the very thing they did when they first received the good news about Jesus. They believed it and were given new life. Their growth in Christ, denoted by the theological word “sanctification,” will proceed in exactly the same way, by continuing to center on Jesus.

The false teachers Paul is opposing were using an old trick. They were tapping into a deep and legitimate desire and then promising to meet that desire. I read this week of someone telling of how they received a solicitation to subscribe to a particular magazine. In an attempt to sweeten the deal, the publisher promised to send to all subscribers several booklets, titled as follows: “The Secrets of Health and Better Living,” “The Secrets of Shrewd Money Management,” “The Secrets of Being a Smarter Consumer,” and “The Secrets of Winning at Almost Anything.” To top it all off, he also promised to send a book entitled *How to Do Everything Right*. If the false teachers of Colossae wrote a book, it would likely be titled *The Secret to a Deeper Relationship with God*. What they were tapping into was the desire every Christian has for a deeper and more satisfying relationship with God. They were promising that such a relationship could be achieved through some specific practices and knowledge that had little to do with Jesus. Paul teaches that Jesus is to be kept central not only to our conversion, but to our Christian life as well. He warns that to do otherwise is to be taken into captivity. Paul’s central principle, then, is that Christian growth comes through faith in Christ. Let’s look further at this key principle.

I. The Principle Stated

The principle Paul puts forward is that we make progress in the Christian life in the same way that we entered the Christian life, through faith in Jesus. **“As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.”** He then uses a metaphor to further explain this: **“rooted and built up in him.”** Some have thought this is a mixed metaphor, with “rooted” coming from the world of plants and “built up” from the world of construction. I think it more likely that Paul is using the word “rooted” to describe a building’s foundation, a usage not

uncommon in his day. So this is not a mixed metaphor, but a unified metaphor that refers to the way a building is constructed. Imagine someone going through all the hard work of building a foundation, digging into the hard ground, setting the stones into it, making sure the corners are square, and finally finishing the foundation. And then, imagine that when it comes time to begin erecting the walls, the foundation is abandoned and the walls are just set on the ground somewhere else, with no foundation. These false teachers are advocating something just as foolish. They are claiming that Christian growth—sanctification to use the theological term—comes by something other than faith in Christ. We're not quite sure what they were advocating, but it seemed to have something to do with power over demons through observance of ascetic practices that would lead to visions of some type. What is clear is that their secret formula served to take people away from Jesus.

So Paul is saying that we continue in the Christian life in the same way that we began it. How did it begin? People come into a relationship with Jesus through repentance and faith. The process of becoming a Christian always begins in weakness. We must come to the place of realizing that we have messed up our lives through our self-centered commitment to do what we want to do. Then we must abandon our own self-rule and come to God with empty hands, as naked and as helpless. In the words of that great hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die." Conversion to Christ may start in weakness, but then it moves to the greatest heights imaginable. We dare to believe that there is full forgiveness, a new identity, a new power and a bright future of everlasting joy. And all this we have as a gift that can never be lost.

That's the way the Christian life begins, and that's the way it continues. How do you know that you are building on the foundation of Christ? The last three words of verse 7 answer that question. The inevitable result of continuing to center your Christian life on Jesus is that you will be **"abounding in thanksgiving."** The word for "abounding" means to be overflowing. Gratitude dominates the life of the person who is being sanctified by faith in Christ. Dick Lucas says it like this: "For the voice of thanksgiving speaks without ceasing of the goodness of God. It claims nothing. It sees no merit in man's receiving but only in God's giving. It marvels at his mercy. It is the language of joy just because it need look no longer to its own resources."

What do you think is needed for you to make progress in your Christian life? Many look to their own performance in answering that question, and their standard for their performance is often determined by whether they are more task or people-oriented. So a task-oriented person will think that what is needed to make progress in the Christian life is getting on top of his or her task-list. "If I could just be more efficient and productive, then I would be so much more spiritual." This person is often motivated by some new task that

can be done to bring him closer to God. It may be a good thing like Scripture memory or Bible reading, or it may simply be completion of all one's tasks. Those who are more people-oriented look to approval by others. If others like them or approve of them, then they feel that all is right with their world. Paul says here that it is neither accomplishing our tasks nor winning the approval of others that marks a properly centered life, but a heart that is abounding in thanksgiving.

Perhaps a personal illustration will help. I find myself tempted to think that I would be more spiritual if I could manage to get to the end of my "to-do" list, which hasn't happened ever in my lifetime. This desire is often centered on finishing a sermon. If I finish the sermon early and feel good about it, then I think all is well. If I struggle with the sermon, I can get down on myself, experience some mild depression and get short with people. When that happens, it's an indication that I am not continuing to walk by faith.

Here's how we are to think about the Christian life. It means to rest first and then to work. We rest in all that we have in Christ, and the indication that we are doing so is a heart of thanksgiving. And then we go forth in work with this overflowing gratitude. So the application is simple. Repent and believe until you find your heart beginning to be grateful. The great effort of our lives every day should be to seek Jesus until such gratitude comes.

II. The Principle Opposed

The false teachers of Colossae were opposing this principle, and Paul warns the church about them. **"See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit"** (v. 8). When Paul mentions philosophy, he is not talking about the academic study of various thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. Rather, he means empty and deceptive religious philosophies that are not centered on Jesus. We are to get our religious ideas from what God has revealed to us in the Bible, not from other thinkers who give their opinions about God from sources outside the Bible. And since the Bible is centered on Jesus, our religious ideas need to be centered there as well. So Paul is warning us to be careful not to be led astray by anyone who would lead us away from a focus on Jesus. Even if they claim great authority, we are not to be led astray. That's what Paul means when he refers to **"human tradition."** In this day, one way to gain credibility was to lay claim to old traditions, much the same way that people do today by laying claim to recognized experts. And even if the claim is made that it comes from "elemental spirits of the world," a reference to other-worldly beings, we are not to be persuaded by such appeals.

Let me try to help us in this by mentioning two contemporary examples of the false teaching Paul is countering here. The first one comes from a book that was published several years ago that spoke of territorial demons. This teaching

took one verse from the prophet Daniel and built an entire theology of the Christian life upon it. This theology taught that there are territorial demons holding sway over sinful patterns existing in the life of a person, family or region. The key, it said, was to address that demon and cast it out in the name of Jesus. So if a church is plagued by divisiveness, the need is to cast out the demon of divisiveness. It's not hard to see how such an approach would tend to take the emphasis away from what Jesus has done for us through his death and resurrection. Instead of calling people to repent of the sinful pride that leads to divisiveness and to receive the forgiveness freely offered by Jesus, we place the blame elsewhere and also forsake the grace that could be ours through Jesus.

A second example of what Paul is warning us about here is an overemphasis on such spiritual disciplines as Scripture memory, Bible reading and prayer. The overemphasis comes when we think that growth is automatic when these disciplines are faithfully performed. In doing so, the focus of our attention gets redirected to ourselves and away from Christ. Though spiritual disciplines are essential to the Christian life, if they are removed from resting in Christ, they lead us astray. Jesus makes the first word of the Lord's Prayer what it is for a reason—"Father." We always start by filling our hearts, by faith, with a deep sense that we have a Father in heaven who loves us based on the finished work of Jesus on our behalf. That brings us to our next and final point.

III. The Principle Explained

Beginning in verse 9, Paul turns from the error to be avoided to the truth to be embraced. His basic thrust is to talk about our union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. Union with Christ means that we are joined to him like a husband is joined to his wife, and like the branches are joined to the grapevine, with the result that what happens to one happens to the other. So when Jesus died, there is a sense in which we also died. And since we died in Christ, there is no more punishment for sin possible, because our sin has already been paid for in our death that happened in the death of Jesus.

Paul expands on the forgiveness achieved by Jesus in verse 14. God forgives us "**by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.**" The record of debt Paul speaks of is like a promissory note. Our sin results in a debt owed to God, and someone must pay the debt. When he says that this promissory note was nailed to the cross, that tells us who paid it. It was customary in Roman crucifixions for the crime of the crucified to be written on a placard and nailed to the cross on which the condemned was executed. This says that my sin, and the sin of any who are joined into union with Jesus by faith, is nailed to that cross as the reason for Jesus' death. Martin Luther expressed it like this:

“Thou Christ art my sin and my curse, or rather, I am thy sin, thy curse, thy death, thy wrath of God, thy hell; and contrariwise, thou art my righteousness, my blessing, my life, my grace of God and my heaven.”

Hasn't Paul covered this ground already in this book? Isn't he being a little repetitive? Yes and yes. That's the whole point. The Christian life is necessarily repetitive, going back to Jesus for forgiveness over and over again. It's not that we get so good and sanctified that we no longer need forgiveness. Quite the opposite is the case. As we grow as Christians, we see more of our sin and find ourselves going to Jesus for forgiveness more frequently, not less.

We are also in union with Christ in his resurrection. Jesus has **“disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them”** (v. 15). This is a reference to the Roman triumphal procession in which a returning, conquering general would parade his conquered enemies before the Roman citizens. These enemies were once proud and powerful soldiers bent on bringing destruction to Roman citizens. But now they no longer pose the least threat. All the demons of hell have been so subjugated by Jesus. What once frightened us need no longer do so.

CONCLUSION:

The secret of the Christian life is that there is no secret to the Christian life. Think of it like this. Your primary duty every day is to experience afresh the joy of sins forgiven. You have a Father in heaven who loves you, not because of your performance, but because of the performance of Jesus. You grow as a Christian simply by growing in your gratitude for that. Think about it. Where there is a heart of gratitude, there is simply no room for sin. And because of Jesus, we have every reason for gratitude. It is now the case that nothing can separate us from the love of God through Christ.

When our son was about five or six years old, we once found him explaining to a group of adults at our house how to do brain surgery. He spoke with utter confidence because he had seen a television documentary on the subject, and now he was an expert. Such overconfidence is not an attractive quality. Did Wendy and I as his parents kick him out of the family because of this unattractive quality? Of course not. He's our son, and we love him dearly. Can you receive the fact that your heavenly Father feels similarly about you? Can you be grateful for this breathtaking grace from God in Christ? To the degree that you can, you will grow and mature as a Christian.