

June 23, 2019

Lesson 4: Hearts United in Love

Scripture: Colossians 2: 1-15

Context:

Our lesson on covenant continues with another epistle lesson. However, this epistle is an actual letter that was written to the church in Colossae. This pericope comes in the midst of a longer section in the letter. As one reads the end of the first chapter and the beginning of this one, there is a theme of Paul defending his ministry. It was very likely that Paul and his colleagues had to explain that his suffering was not a sign of weakness in leadership and that his imprisonment did not have to carry a negative connotation.¹ Paul shows that his suffering is part of his leadership and that it is not to deter him from being their shepherd. He seeks not to punish them with his words, but rather embrace them and explain the bigger picture.

Paul's word choices are very encouraging and carry an upbeat tone. He affirms the Colossians and reminds them that they are stable in their faith. His explanation for his own suffering is that in his service to these various Gentile congregations, he is called upon to represent his people as a martyr figure and to perform ministry on their behalf.² He wants them to keep up the faith in the mean time.

Yet Paul also has a piece of advice in the midst of his encouragement to those in Colossae. He wants them to beware of philosophies and mythologies that might focus on following traditions that are not healthy. We might think of them as superstitions or old wives tales. Imagine if we were to follow them as religious truths from our Lord.

Yet Paul is also answering the question that was plaguing most church communities concerning circumcision. Using vivid language, Paul reminds them that they have already been circumcised with a new life in Christ, which frees them from old wives tales as well as the need to be circumcised. In essence, Paul is saying that no force in this world that is "demonic" or human, impersonal or personal, structural or individualistic – can separate us from God's love in Christ.³ Nothing can separate the Colossians from God's love.

To drive home the point, Paul uses several analogies. He tells them that their record of sin was destroyed by Jesus's canceling of it on the cross. He then closes with what is perhaps even more radical by suggesting that Jesus's death, life, and resurrection were also a disarming of the Roman hierarchy. We remember the palms being waved when Jesus entered Jerusalem and realize that Jesus is not afraid to take off the boxing gloves and do what needs to be done. This should give the Colossians hope in their journey and also remind them that Jesus has made a covenant with them.

¹ Ralph P. Martin, "Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1991), 111.

² *Ibid.*, 112.

³ *Ibid.*, 117.

Application

Colossians has some of the most beautiful language in the New Testament. There is a focus on unity and Christ being over all things. When Paul writes to the Colossians, you can tell that he is talking to a congregation that is very visual and very diverse. What little we do know about Colossae is that it was a cosmopolitan city in modern day Turkey that probably had emigrants from Mesopotamia and Babylon, as well as other areas that had been conquered by the Roman Empire.⁴ The Colossian congregation, like many of our churches, probably had people from different backgrounds coming together.

In many ways, we are very much like the Colossians. We are a very visual society and we have people from all sorts of backgrounds even if our appearances *appear* the same. Yet we all find our way through the church doors.

And like the Colossians, we too struggle with the human philosophies and clichés that run in our culture. Often they center around the understanding of suffering and pain. The phrase “God has a plan,” is one that gets dropped more times than I can count. You might have heard of it couched in the secular friendly version: “Everything happens for a reason.” If I had a dime for every time in ministry I heard that phrase, I could retire tomorrow. (And I’ve only been in full-time ministry for five years.)

Other clichés include things around self-help and improvement. “God helps those who help themselves.” Some clichés are about spiritual disciplines. “You just to pray a little harder and have faith.” There are countless others.

Most of these clichés lead to us seeing God as some ATM in which we punch in the code, and if the machine is working, we will get something out of it that we can put in our pocket and carry on our merry way. Yet that misses the whole point of covenant and understanding of who Jesus is in our life.

In the case of our letter today we learn that suffering happens to Christians. We learn that others will slander Christian leaders to get ahead in this life. We learn that the early church struggled also struggled with clichés and following traditions that sometimes prohibited them from loving each other. The early church needed pictures to help them figure out God and what Jesus did for them.

The good news in the letter is that we are not alone as we see that our brothers and sisters from years ago struggled with the same things we do today. We all have pain in our families and our lives. We see people attack Christian leaders when they don’t get their way and drag their leadership through the mud. We hear people (and maybe even ourselves sometimes) use the clichés to avoid the vulnerability and pain that is present in a person’s life. We see people sticking to tradition instead of seeing new ideas because change is scary. We need help seeing who Jesus would be in terms that make sense today.

We are reminded by this letter to Colossae that how we respond is that we live as close to Jesus as we can do in our lives. We sit with friends who are pain, sometimes without the “perfect words.” We support our Christian leaders and when people slander them, we shut it down or encourage them to talk to those leaders. We can try new ideas and fall on our faces just to get back up and try again. All in all we can give thanks to Jesus that he has given our lives so that we may live with thanksgiving and appreciation.

⁴ Ibid., 82.

How will you give thanks to God with your life?

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