

Life in Him - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Colossians 2:6-23** (#511)

Introduction: “What did I talk about before 2020?” That was the question that came to my mind a few weeks ago, and the answer scared me. Not because I talk a lot about the news – actually, like many of you, I’ve tried to really limit my news intake. Not because I would answer that question with politics – I’m actually trying to avoid the constant downward spiral of most political commentary these days. But instead, what worried me, is that I didn’t easily remember what I talked about before COVID and the elections and the problems in our nation started consuming us all. Judging by the conversations I’ve had with some of you, I suspect you’re in the same boat also.

Friends, one thing I haven’t always done a good job on as a pastor is explaining to you why I give the applications that I do. Sometimes, I hope it is obvious. Other times, it probably isn’t, even if I assume that it is. You can pray for me, that I would get better at that, but to give one related example this morning: part of the reason that I seem to be harping on the news and social media and politics so much lately is because I’m very concerned about how each of those sources is forming us as Christians. How it has subtly – but undeniably – changed the ways in which we speak to one another, how we think, and what we care about. And how we have even begun to see other people – and perhaps, even, to judge them or dismiss them – based on politics or opinions rather than by facts or who they actually are. Said another way: my concern is that we are living and thinking more along the lines of worldly ideas and philosophies than Christian truth.

There’s hope for us though, and we’ll see it in Paul’s letter to the Colossians this morning. They, too, were in danger of being more influenced by the world’s ways of thinking than by Christ’s ways. They, too, lived in a world that constantly sought to form their thinking and tell them what mattered most. Yet Paul provides the way forward, the way of faithfulness; and by God’s grace, we can learn where to set our minds, our hopes, and our actions as well. Join me in **Colossians 2 starting with verse 6** and let’s see it together...

2:6-10 In these verses, Paul challenges the Colossian church to *walk in Christ*. What does that mean? Thankfully, we don't have to guess – Paul expands on what he means when he writes that the people of the church are to be “rooted” in Jesus, “built up” in Him, and “established” in the faith. There's something interesting going on here that might be easy to miss, but if we pay close attention to our Bibles, we'll see it: the words “so walk in him,” or “continue to live your lives in him,” as the NIV says, are the only “active” words of this sequence. Understand that what Paul is calling the Colossians to do is to not just give their lives to Jesus – which they have already done – but to keep doing so. To continue that journey of faith in the Lord, by the Spirit's enablement, and for God's glory.

But the second part in **verse 7**, where we read Paul's expanded thoughts – those are all passive participles. They describe not something that you are I are to do in our own strength or strategy, but instead reinforce that Jesus has begun and will complete this work that we are called to live in, to continue in. It is Jesus who roots us, who gives us not only our foundation but the very things that we need for growth. It is Jesus who builds us up, who takes what He Himself provides and grows us with it. And it is Jesus who establishes us in the faith. Jesus is the One who completes the work. Our role is to follow – to abound in thanksgiving by how we live – that's the active response to this work. That's how we walk in Him.

Which is important. It's one of the things that sets Christianity apart from any other religion or philosophy or manner of life. Other religions talk about how you have to do more and try harder. In Christianity, it is Jesus who has done the work. It is He who sees you safely to your heavenly home. This “working harder” idea is found not only in human attempts at religion... I read an article recently about Christian parenting, where the author – a mother – wrote about how exhausting parenting is these days. Her point of tiredness wasn't the sleepless nights or the messy diapers. No, instead what was wearing her down was all of the advice and best practices on “mommy blogs.” You might have experienced this yourself: to be a good mom you have to... And make sure you definitely don't... And how could you not know about... I'm sure whoever writes these blogs is well-intentioned, but what they are actually doing is creating something not too

different from the laws of the Pharisees: burdening people instead of giving them joy. Harming instead of helping.

And the situation confronting the Colossians isn't too different from that. Starting in **verse 8**, we're going to be introduced bit by bit to something that is hard to understand. Some Bible scholars call this the "Colossian heresy," though what exactly Paul is arguing against here is much debated. Rather than trying to figure out how to label the exact beliefs that were threatening the Colossian church, we can simply observe what Paul says and see what he thought important to address. From the start, part of the issue is that Christianity wasn't the only thing happening in Colossae. Instead, this was a town and an area that seemed to be under the influence of a group that was intent on another philosophy, another vision of the way that life should be. Perhaps they had even targeted the believers of the Colossian church; or – if not – then just like you and I, the danger might have been simply to stay faithful when the very air they breathed and waters they swam in called for everything other than Christian faithfulness. That's what we endure, isn't it? Not only the world's constantly changing thinking about race and gender and personhood, but even how our surrounding world envisions success and the "good life." Those worldly ideas constantly push on us and try to form us.

Here, in Colossae, apparently part of that alternate way of believing revolved around humanistic ways of thinking about the very building blocks of life. I don't mean DNA, but instead the foundation of what matters. That is what is meant here by "elemental spirits" or "basic principles." The idea is that the very way Christians see the world – that God is the Creator, that there is such a thing as sin, that Jesus is God's Son and has died to rescue all who believe from their sins – that those things which are foundational not only to what Christians believe but also to how they live; it is those very kinds of base-level understandings that this other philosophy was challenging and seeking to discredit, or at least to modify.

What does Paul call the Colossians to do? To live according to Christ. Jesus is the only One who is both fully God and fully man. He, alone, is the One who accomplishes our salvation and indwells us via the Holy Spirit. And therefore only

Jesus – not any other philosophy, not any other assumption or way of thinking – only He is our King, our final authority. We must not be filled with anything else.

Paul's concern is that the Colossians – and every Christian – *walk in Christ*. But there's more here than just facts to respond to. *Walking in Christ* also will result in being *united with Jesus*. Let's see that next...

2:11-15 Aside from the physical sign of circumcision, the spiritual point of the whole process in the Old Testament was for God's people to be set apart – for the men, as those who lead their households, to have their very bodies marked in a way that was distinctive from all the people around them. Now, in the New Testament, physical circumcision is not required, just as there are now Jews and Gentiles who are called to Christ. But, in a spiritual sense, circumcision is what sets apart every believer from the world around us. Therefore, Paul's point in these verses is that Christians are those who have been transformed. Not by some physical process or outward sign, but instead by the careful spiritual work of Jesus Himself. That's what he means by circumcision here. And it is also what he means by baptism.

It isn't that baptism is the exact same thing – if it were, then Paul could have saved himself the ink and simply given one example or the other. Instead, circumcision in the New Testament era (which extends even to now, even 'till Christ's return) is the inward spiritual reality. The outward sign of this, though, is distinctively Christian. It is different from any work that the Israelites were commanded to perform, and the symbolism is different as well. When a person is physically baptized – which I believe can be strongly argued from the Scriptures means immersion in water – the picture is of them being “buried with Christ” in death and “raised” with Him to eternal life. Our identity in Christ, our unity with Him – what we might then call our spiritual baptism – which physical baptism only points to, happens not through that outward sign, but through faith. Through trusting Him as our Savior and continuing to walk in that very trust for the rest of our lives.

So, just as Paul makes clear here: the picture is one of salvation. It is the reality of somebody being dead in their trespasses and sins and yet God making them alive in Christ, forgiven, the debt cancelled. All of this, by the way, is one of the major indicators that baptism is to be only for believers. Somebody who doesn't actually trust Jesus can't intend to reflect any of these truths when they are baptized. And nowhere do we see, to use infants as an example, that parents can somehow reflect this reality on behalf of their children.

Dear church: if you trust Jesus, you need to be baptized. It isn't because baptism saves you, but because this is what it looks like to walk in Christ. Why would you want to set aside one of the clearest ways that the New Testament gives for growing in your faith? Why would you want to hamstring your own spiritual growth by not being confirmed and nourished in this way? Perhaps you think you are too old, or don't know enough, or maybe – like me – you were baptized first as an infant. I tell you, wherever you are coming from, if you genuinely trust Christ as your Lord and Savior, then baptism is open to you and it is good for you. I've been baptized as a believer, and I call you to be as well. If you follow Jesus and yet have not been baptized, it's time to take that step. You can let me know in the next few days as I'm working to put a baptism class together for some time in the next few months or the summer. Let this physical sign display the spiritual change that Christ is already working in you. Yet, baptism is – of course – not the only way to walk in Christ. And here, the spiritual reality is more Paul's point than the physical one. This is basic and foundational, but Paul gives more teaching as well...

2:16-19 Because of Christ's work, no other ruler or authority – no matter how rich and powerful, no matter how influential – nobody else is qualified to pass judgment upon you in faith. By that, Paul's point isn't to talk about judgment in general – other passages speak more to that issue – but instead to say that whatever philosophy is endangering the Colossians seems to be one that gives them new rules to follow, new ideas to believe, if they are to be counted faithful.

I tell you, nothing is different today. Just like with the "mommy blogs" that I mentioned before, it seems that our natural human bent is to dream up new rules

for people to follow. Churches are really bad at this. One of our big dangers is to take good applications and turn them into laws that every Christian everywhere must somehow follow in order to be faithful. Thus, we have a church-wide Bible reading program. This is a great thing. I'd argue that every Christian should be getting into the Word regularly. But does that mean every Christian has to do our program? Does that mean that you can't vary; perhaps slowing down and camping out on a passage to really chew on it for a few days? Does it mean that every Christian has to read through the entire Bible with us? No, no, and no! Beware of turning what might be good applications into terrible laws. And this goes for all kinds of things. "Every Christian – to be faithful – has to vote for this candidate, this party..." "Faithful Christians give money to this cause..." "On this social issue, the Christian position is..." Brothers and sisters: unless the Bible clearly gives answers to whatever issue is at hand, we need to beware of such thinking. You can take a stance on any number of issues, but be sure that you don't assume every other Christian has to agree with you to be found faithful.

That point, after all, is the one that Paul makes here. The Christian faith, he says, is not about what you eat or drink or which holidays you celebrate. There might be some value in such things (or there might not!), but ultimately what matters, what is solid, is Jesus Himself. In the same way then, any command that doesn't come from the Scriptures – and here the examples involve minimalistic living, worshipping angels, and having certain ideas about visions – these, you should flat out ignore. They aren't God's ideas. They aren't the definition of faithfulness. Instead, what is necessary, the growth and life that we need, comes from Jesus. He is the Head and we are the body. How does all this come together, then?

2:20-23 Here's what Paul envisions as the faith-filled response: if you are in Christ, then act like it. Don't act like a person who has one foot in the church and another in this world. Don't submit to the world's philosophies and ways of thinking. Instead, hold to the Word. What you need for spiritual growth – which is what will matter in eternity – isn't found out there. It's found in what God has said. And what He says is that Jesus is all we need. He's the only One we are to follow. What do you need to give up on to more faithfully follow Him? Let's pray...