

The Victory Cross

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — VIII after Pentecost, July 25, 2004

Colossians 2:6-15 NIV

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

The cartoon character Charlie Brown once said, “Whenever I read the Epistles of St. Paul I have the feeling I’m reading somebody else’s mail.” There’s a certain truth to that, because we always need to remember that the different parts of the Bible were written, or spoken, into specific situations in the history of God’s people.

There’s a school of thought today in some philosophical circles that says that a text has a meaning entirely apart from its origin or its context, and that the intentions of the author are irrelevant. I happen to disagree wholeheartedly. I think the meaning of a text has *everything* to do with its historical context, whether it’s a play of Shakespeare’s, the United States Constitution, or the Bible. In my opinion a Bible passage means what the author *meant* it to say, and what the first readers and hearers *understood* it to mean. We can’t take the words of Holy Scripture and make them mean something else two or three thousand years later. We can apply these words to our own culture and situation, but first we need to understand, to the best of our ability, what they meant in their original context, because *that is their meaning*.

What makes it possible for us to take these ancient words and apply them to our own lives is this: It’s the same God who speaks through these words, the same Holy Spirit of Christ who quickens them to us, and—not least of all—*we are the same people* to whom the words are addressed, that people the Apostle Paul calls “the Israel of God.” The Bible story is our story too, because we are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, Moses, David, Ezra, Peter, John, Paul and all the believers whose names punctuate Holy Writ. So, in a sense, Charlie Brown was wrong: when reading the letters of Paul we are not reading somebody else’s mail, but mail addressed to us. It’s God’s mail to all of his people — maybe we should call it our G-mail.

Our Scripture lesson today comes from Paul’s letter to the Colossians, and as is usually the case with the Apostle Paul it contains some heavy theology that we really need to deal with. But it breaks down into three main sections, and we can deal with them one by one and look at both the theological depth and the practical ramifications. I don’t have a lot of entertaining stories to tell you today, but I hope we’ll all see the “hooks” in this passage that connect with our lives.

So let’s plunge in with the first section:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (Colossians 2:6-8).

Even when he gets into deep theology, Paul always sees the practical side. Notice how he begins the sections by urging us to “overflow with thankfulness” while holding to the faith of Christ that we received. Those two things really do go together. When you meet someone who’s resentful and angry about life, instead of “overflowing with thankfulness,” it’s pretty certain they don’t know Christ as their Lord. Why? Because it’s when *I’m in the center of my own life* that I become defensive and grasping and self-justifying. That’s a pretty miserable way to live, always looking out for the supposed Number One. When the *real* Number One is in charge, I’m set free from that defensive posture because I understand that I’m not such a big deal, after all.

What made me think I was such a big deal? Well, Paul goes on to mention that “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world.” There’s a philosophy today — and it’s been around a long while — that says that we’re the center of our own lives. We hear it in that famous poem, *Invictus*, by William Ernest Henley: “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.” When hear it in the popular song by Frank Sinatra, “I Did It My Way.” We hear it in the creed of the New Age movement. We hear it in the abortion philosophy that says, “It’s my body, I can do what I want with it.”

When I bought into that philosophy, I lost out on happiness in Christ. Being the center of your own universe has a way of making you into a kind of black hole that sucks everything in and keeps you from seeing the light and goodness all around you. Buying into that philosophy destroys relationships and makes things difficult for people close to you. In other words, it makes you a jerk.

But I think there was a special form of this self-centered philosophy that was on Paul’s mind when he wrote these words. Listening to Paul, we need to recall that he was a Jew working among Jews, even in some of the great cities of the Roman Empire. And when he spoke of “human tradition and the basic principles of this world,” he had something very Jewish in mind, specifically that particular strain of Jewish teaching that had distorted the faith of Abraham, making it into a set of standards against which we can prove our own worth.

It wasn’t the Law that was the problem; Paul called the Law “holy and righteous and good.” It was the way the Law was being twisted that had Paul upset, because there were people that had made it into a system not for saying something grand and glorious about God but for making a statement about how superior and separated *we* are. A set of traditions had grown up that were a substitute for deep, personal faith in the Lord — and, as we know, Jesus ran afoul of that system also, and eventually it took him to the cross. When Paul uses the phrase “basic principles of the world” I think he’s referring specifically to that Judaic system.

I haven’t time to bring it out here, but in the New Testament the term “world” doesn’t usually mean the physical globe, the earth, but rather the *cultural world* of ancient Judaism. And this expression “basic principles” in Greek is the word *stoicheia*, which means “things lined up.” For Paul, then, the “basic principles of the world” were the lineup or framework of the Judaic religious system, a system through which people thought they could prove to God how good *they* are. And Paul is warning us not to be deceived by any system like that, because it will always defeat us. Instead, Paul turns it around, in Romans 12:2, where he says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve *what God’s will is*.” You see, it’s all about perspective, how we look at things. Instead of looking at life with a view to enacting the fantasies of *our* will, we look at life through the lens of God’s plan as he has revealed it in the Word. That’s what Christian conversion, or repentance, really is — in Greek the word is *metanoia*, change of mind. To become a Christian is to start looking at life through God’s eyes, and making decisions based on his perspective.

So Paul is warning us here to be careful about substituting traditions, or familiar and comfortable ways of thinking and doing, for a vital response to the presence of God. We do truly have to be *presence-driven* in our practice of the faith. We can start right here in church. When we pray, are we filling a spot in the order of service, or are we talking with God? When we sing, are we mouthing the words of some old familiar lyric or are we reaching out to the Holy to express our love and devotion? When we give, are we funding an institution or are we joyfully providing for others to be touched by the healing presence of Christ? When we talk to a friend before or after church, are we passing the time or are we imparting and

receiving the encouragement of the Holy Spirit? And our *presence-driven* approach to life goes out from these walls into the home, the marketplace, the school, the workplace, the neighborhood, the community.

Now let's go on to Paul's second major section here:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:9-12).

I wish I had time to dwell on this, because it's packed. Paul is talking about the nature of Christ and how we meet God through him. Many conclaves of the church have argued the finer points of Christology, as this discipline is called. What we see there is that Paul doesn't deal with the doctrine of Christ in terms of his being or substance, as the ancient creeds do, but rather in terms of *how God works*. As he said in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself." In the Bible it's always about relationships, and the fulness of God the Father is at work through his Son to restore that broken relationship — a bond that has been torn apart by lack of faithfulness to the covenant God has graciously made with his people. And it's interesting how that relationship gets restored: not by our cleaning up our act, but by our *uniting with Jesus*. As Paul says, you were "buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."

Again, we can't get away from this truth: *Christianity is Jesus*. People often come to church and look for what they can get out of it. And I believe the church is, and ought to be, a vehicle for the saving and healing power of Christ to touch the lives of everyone who is seeking his help. But to ask, "What do I get out of it?" is sort of to miss the point. Christianity isn't about *me*, it's about *Him*. When we were baptized we became members of Christ. You may be concerned about becoming a better person and a better Christian, and that's fine. I'm concerned about those things for myself. Our efforts to grow and mature in the faith are all to the good. But the truth is that, if we have united with Christ, nothing we can do will make God love us any more than he already does, because when he looks at us he sees his own beloved Son.

That's why I think it's so important to be presence-driven in our approach to both our personal faith and our church life. While we're with you in this interim period I hope that *presence-driven* approach remains our emphasis. If during these few months we do anything that seems unusual or goofy, remember two things. First, we probably did it with a view to helping us to see how Christ is *present* among us. And the second thing to remember is that I'm only the interim minister.

Finally, let's take a look at that third section of our New Testament reading:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:13-15).

Think about this for a moment. This is one of the most remarkable passages in the New Testament. Usually we think of Christ being nailed to the cross for our transgressions, and our sins being nailed to the cross with him because, as Isaiah says, "he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). Here in Colossians Paul turns this picture around. It's not our sins that get nailed to the cross, but the *accusations against us!* And it's Jesus who is doing the nailing! The cross is not Jesus' defeat at the hands of the enemy of our souls. Instead, the cross is Jesus' decisive and signal victory over the powers of evil and darkness that want to condemn us and tear us down. As John wrote, "For this purpose was the Son of God manifest, to destroy the works of the evil one" (1 John 3:8). In other words, Jesus saves us not only by paying the price for our sin, but also by *destroying our accuser* — a theology of the atonement that theologians call the *Christus Victor* theology, or "Christ the Conqueror."

But I'd like to focus here on one particular theme. Paul says that "having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us, [Jesus] took it away, nailing it to the cross." Here Paul is again referring to that religious system of his ancient Jewish community, a system

through which people believed they could make a statement about their own worth before God. Now we don't have the Jewish law as our religious system today, but there still are some expectations in our culture that are opposed to us — the literal translation of Paul's expression is "decrees against us." Let's look at some of the decrees against us and see how Jesus sets us free by nailing them to his cross.

One "decree against us" that a lot of us feel pressure from is the decree, "Nobody really cares about you." I don't know how many times I have made a serious mistake in thinking that I wasn't important to anybody else. There have been times when I just walked away from a situation, whether in a church or in family life or in some other relationship, in the mistaken view that nobody would miss me. You see, that voice of the evil one was whispering his decree in my ear: "You could drop through a crack in the floor and nobody would notice." I discovered that when I listened to that voice and walked away, I hurt a lot of people because they really did care about me.

Is that lying decree coming against you today? Do you feel insignificant and ignored and unnoticed? I want to assure you that Jesus has nailed that vicious decree to his cross, and exposed it for the lie it is. Jesus cares for you, and the body of Christ cares for you! Don't make that sad mistake of walking away from brothers and sisters who love you. In a presence-driven ministry we want to remain aware of the compassionate presence of the risen Christ, to whom none of his children are unimportant or insignificant. As Paul told the Corinthians, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor" (1 Corinthians 12:21-23).

Another decree against us is, "You aren't good enough, and you will never measure up or make the grade." I have been plagued by this all my life. I think the bondage to this false decree was modeled for me by my father. To give an example, he was a church historian and was always going to write a book on some aspect of church history. But it seemed that just as he was drawing up his idea to submit to a publisher, somebody else came out with a book along the same lines. So Dad figured his book wouldn't be as good, and he never did publish one. When I lost a college teaching job back in 1974 I figured I would never get another one in a tight market where there were a hundred Ph.Ds for every position. I just gave up trying and eventually spent twenty years in a totally unrelated kind of work as a transportation data analyst. Now that I'm retired I don't care if I'm not good enough, I do what I like to do anyhow! But what if I had understood, back then in my pre-Christian days, that Jesus had nailed that phony decree to his cross? It might have made a big difference in what little I've been able to do for the Lord.

I don't care if you are 18 or 80, do not listen to that decree against you, "You aren't good enough." Learn to say, with the Psalmist of Psalm 138, "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes, with your right hand you save me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me." Know that Jesus has freed you from that damaging decree and will enable you, by his Spirit, to do what you have always wanted to do in any worthwhile cause for his kingdom.

Jesus has nailed to his cross those false decrees against us. I was so impressed by this truth a few months ago that I rewrote the words to the hymn "The Old Rugged Cross." Someday I may ask you to sing them, but today let me just close with these stanzas:

*To that rude, shameful cross we would look up, amazed,
Where, Jesus, you suffered and died.
For in God's awesome love you were gloriously raised
In power to reign at his side.*

*When they led you, O Lord, up that sorrowful way
To hill and to cross and to nail,
All the demons who thought they were winning the day
Were thwarted — for you would prevail.*

*We were lost, under sin, and accounted as dead,
Condemned by unyielding decree.
But, Lord Jesus, your cross bore the curse in our stead;
We're found, and delivered, and free!*

*You have called us, O Christ, to a share in your cross,
To self-yielding service with you.
But that cross is our gain and the enemy's loss,
For through it you triumph anew.*

*Thank you, Lord, for your Victory Cross,
Where you put all your enemies down!
Through the might of your Victory Cross
We inherit your Victory Crown.*

Christ is present with us, and because of his life in our midst we see life in a different perspective. We see that it's not about us, it's about him, and that he has won the victory for us against the lies of the enemy. Sometimes it is a good idea to read somebody else's mail, because we discover the message really was for us after all.

Sermon text ©2004 Richard C. Leonard
Bible text © as applicable