

Group Study Outline

INTRODUCTION & RECAP

READ 2:6-7

What is Paul sure about in these Colossians (from here, and earlier in the letter)?

What is Paul worried about (from here, and from earlier in the letter)?

Why is Paul writing?

QUESTIONS

READ 2:8-15

This paragraph is where Paul is clearest about what the FTers were saying.

In pairs: where in this passage are we told what the FTers were saying?

(cf 8, 16, 18, 21)

What kind of things mattered to them? List on a large piece of paper.

How might each of these things be a kind of 'Jesus plus ...'?

Can you think of some contemporary examples of each?

Are all of these contemporary examples *inevitably* 'Jesus plus ...'?

How does something which is OK in itself actually become 'Jesus plus ...'?

(Leaders beware! This is a potentially destructive moment! Just because someone thinks something in our Christian world is similar to what Paul describes here, that doesn't mean it *is* 'Jesus plus ...'!)

What does Paul say against each?

Why is each so wrong?

What does he want the Colossian Christians to do? For example, does he want the Colossians to ignore *all* rules (cf 21)?

The paragraph 9-15 seems to interrupt Paul's denunciation of the FTers.

What are we told here about Jesus?

(There's a lot here, so stick with this question!)

What are we told here about us/Christians?

(This is difficult, so be clear yourself in your prep)

Why does Paul emphasise the start of their Christian lives (ie circumcision, baptism)?

Why does Paul emphasise forgiveness (13-15)?

How do the pictures in v14 and v15 underline that we really *are* forgiven?

Why might Paul be saying all this about forgiveness in the middle of his denunciation of the FTers?

CONCLUSION / APPLICATION

Do we devalue forgiveness? How?

Why is this dangerous (according to *Colossians*)?

How does this study help us as we plan towards *A Passion for Life* next term?

How do the warnings of this passage help us to 'walk in him' (2:6)?

And what would you say that means, after studying this passage?

Colossians 2:6-23



Colossians at a glance

The church in Colossae was planted by someone called Epaphras, a 'fellow servant... a faithful minister of Christ' (1:7). Paul was so pleased to hear how they were growing. But he also wanted to warn them.

There would be teachers (or 'FTers' in these notes) who might 'delude' them with their clever arguments (2:4), pulling them away from Jesus. The FTers would make Christians feel they weren't enjoying *everything* God had to offer.

Paul wrote this letter to remind them that actually they do have ... everything! All the fullness of God dwells in Jesus, and Jesus fully fills every believer (2:9-10). It doesn't get fuller than that! When it comes to knowing God, being forgiven, growing in godliness, and arriving safely in glory, all we need is Jesus!

Paul's pastoral method is therefore to exalt Jesus: if we really grasp His supremacy and sufficiency (1:15-20), then that will help us to 'continue in the faith' (1:23), the hope of the gospel that God has made public and that Paul has been proclaiming so tirelessly (1:23; 2:3). That is exactly *why* Paul says all that he says about Jesus: 'in order that no-one may delude us'.

Because, of course, we still face the same potential delusions today. There are many sections of the Christian church that are similarly – and sadly – promoting a 'Jesus plus ...' gospel today. But if we attempt to add anything to all that Jesus already is, we will immediately diminish all that he really is.

Context

This is the point in the letter where Paul savages what the FTers were saying (so it's where we have the clearest indication of what they were saying!). His emphasis is on *warning* (so it's probably best that we keep our emphasis on warning too, rather than over-speculating what their errors might have been):

2:8 don't let anyone take you captive

2:16 don't let anyone judge you (in the sense of '... condemn you')

2:18 don't let anyone disqualify you.

These three warnings match what Paul has already said the gospel achieves:

1:13-14 deliverance/redemption so don't let anyone lead you back into captivity

1:22 no accusation at God's court, so don't let anyone condemn you

1:12 full qualification for heaven, so don't let anyone disqualify you from it.

But look more closely at 1:12, 13-14 and 22. In each case, these verses are about forgiveness. Forgiveness is the chief blessing that the gospel gives us. And it's forgiveness that the FTers are abandoning by moving from the gospel and from Jesus. So right in the middle of 2:8-23 where he is condemning the FTers, Paul exalts forgiveness (2:9-15). To be 'in Christ' (2:10) and to 'walk in him' (2:6-7) is to have complete forgiveness: that is the fullness of 2:10. Playing down forgiveness as 'a bit basic' is the slippery slope to hell ... and the FTers were on it. Paul's warning is 'don't go with them'.

[NS]

Theme Sentence for 2:6-23

Continue in Jesus and his full forgiveness alone; don't fall for useless alternatives.

Commentary

6-7 Continue with Jesus

These verses are the key to the whole letter. When they became Christians, the Colossians took on board the most extraordinary claims about Jesus:

(a) that he was Christ/Messiah. That is, he was God's appointed king-for-ever whom the OT had spent centuries looking forward to, through whom God would rescue and make people his own, and who will judge all nations of the earth. All God's plans centre on him.

(b) that he was Lord. That is, he was the creator, ruler, sustainer, owner of the entire cosmos, God himself. The entire universe centres on him.

To 'receive' someone as awesome as this Jesus of 1:15-20 must mean submitting to him. Now, writes Paul, they are to 'walk in him': we 'continue in the faith' (1:23) by living in submission to him. 3:1f will give examples of what this means in terms of behaviour (eg look how often 3:18-4:1 talks about Jesus being Lord as the basis for Christian lifestyle). But, at this stage in the letter, with the context of Paul's exposure of the FTers in 2:8-23, the point is that they 'walk in him' by not falling for the lies which the FTers were so persuasively peddling. The FTers were saying that you 'continue' by sticking with them. Paul is saying that you 'continue' by not sticking with them but by sticking with Jesus.

'Rooted' and 'built up' mixes analogies from horticulture and architecture ... but the big point is clear. We continue where we began. The plant doesn't sprout somewhere away from the root, nor the building away from its foundations. It's 'just as you were taught', that faith, in which we're to 'continue' (1:23).

8-23 Don't continue with the FTers

There have been all kinds of theories put forward about which C1st movement the FTers were part of (including that it might be warning about a hypothetical threat). But from 8-23, we are clear that it involved ...

- clever-clever ideas/scholarship which deceives because it is so clever (8)
- spiritual disciplines: certain days and what you eat/drink matters (16)
- weird and wonderful worship, with claims of visions (18)
- religious rules/regulations about what you should/shouldn't do (21).

Presumably, what was being said was that these kinds of things open the way to a deeper experience of heaven: it was served up as genuine, mature, going-on-with-the-Lord spirituality.

But Paul dismisses all this 'spirituality' with the very strongest language. There's no place in this paragraph for valuing someone else's tradition!

- the clever ideas are 'empty' and ultimately as elementary as A, B, C (8). The FTers may claim 'tradition' (ie that it's been handed down generation to generation) but its ultimate origin is human (whereas Paul's gospel is 'the word of God' [1:25], and grounded on the person and work of Christ).

- spiritual disciplines are a 'shadow' (17). Just as a shadow points to the object that made it, so these disciplines were always intended to point to something that was to come, Jesus (cf Heb 10:1f). Why now abandon Jesus, the substance, to live back in shadow-land?
- high-sounding language about someone's 'spiritual experience' may make me feel inferior as a Christian, but the FTers experience is 'sensual' (ie unspiritual [18-19]). And the person claiming this has lost their connection with the Head (= Jesus 1:18) ... so it's not even Christian!
- religious rules are essentially human (22), concerned with perishable objects of the material world (eg things like food), and, whatever they look like or are claimed to achieve, they are ultimately useless (23).

All of these things are of *no* spiritual value; they are earth-bound (8, 20). Forget them. Leave them behind. They're *nothing* to do with being a Christian disciple. See how strongly Paul names and shames them!

It's Jesus, and Jesus only, that you need. 'The whole fullness' is in him (9). So anyone 'in Christ' (ie a Christian) has been given 'fullness' (10). But what exactly is this fullness?

- *circumcision* (11). It's possible that the FTers may have been offering a particularly Jewish 'fullness', and circumcision as the way into it. Paul is saying that a Christian is 'circumcised' (even though it's not physical or visible). He doesn't yet say what this circumcision is, only that we have a perfectly full one in Christ.
- *baptism* (12-13). When someone becomes a Christian (pictured in baptism as they go down into the water and then come up again), they die and rise again. Just as Jesus died and rose, so Christians have died and fully risen again.

And now he explains that both this dying-and-rising and this circumcision is the same thing: it's forgiveness. And this forgiveness is full because it's ...

- *the past cancelled* (14). Just as crucified criminals had a list of their crimes nailed over their heads, our crimes against God's law were nailed about Jesus' head. That IOU has therefore now gone. Fully gone. At the cross, we are forgiven.
- *the powers disarmed* (15). Just as Romans celebrated military victory by leading the conquered through the streets, so Jesus 'triumphed' over Satan and Co., the ones who had that accusing IOU, so they no longer hold us hell-bound in their grip. Not at all. At the cross, we are forgiven.

We are surely meant to conclude that there could be no forgiveness 'fuller' or more complete than what 14-15 describes. To leave Jesus is to leave forgiveness. It may well be that the FTers disparaged forgiveness as a bit basic. Paul celebrates it as the fullness of the gospel.

As we look ahead to *A Passion For Life*, there is no better time to be convinced that forgiveness really is the chief blessing of the gospel. Because, if that is so, then we will want non-Christians to 'receive Christ Jesus the Lord'. And if that is true for them, then it's just as true that we will want Christians to continue to 'walk in him', enjoying his forgiveness.