

Complete In Christ

Colossians 2:8-10

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I want to back up to Colossians 2:6-7 to get a running start on our text, Colossians 2:8-10.

Paul says, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ." Why? "For in Him..."—that is, "Christ"—"...dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you..."—as a believer—"...are complete in Him..."—that is, "Christ"—"...who is the head of all principality and power."

One of my favorite Bible teachers is a man who went to heaven years ago. His name is Donald Grey Barnhouse. He was the senior pastor at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He grew up there as a boy. He once told a story of when he was a little boy, he and his friends would go onto the downtown streets of the city and stand on a busy street corner. One of them would look up into the sky and say, "Yes, it is!" Another one would say, "No, it's not!" They would go back and forth like this until inevitably a big crowd would gather around. All these people would be looking up into the sky, and Barnhouse and his friends would quietly and slowly back out of the crowd. They would lean up against a building and get a good chuckle as everyone would be looking up into the sky at nothing.

When speaking about this years later, Donald Grey Barnhouse said, "That little incident is a good illustration of all earthbound religions. People talk about having faith. They tell you to look in one direction, where there is absolutely nothing. Some people are so desperately in need of seeing something that they will look until they are almost blind. But they never catch a glimpse of anything that is real."

That's an illustration of how many people are looking at nothing and thinking they are seeing something.

Paul, at this point in the book of Colossians, is concerned that the believers are not lead astray from Christ. The danger in Colosse was real; false teachers had come into the church and were trying to substitute Paul's teaching with human, Greek philosophy, Jewish legalism and eastern mysticism. That teaching was pulling the believers away from Christ so that they were looking to other things to meet their spiritual needs. So in Colossians, Paul sets forth the sufficiency and adequacy of Christ in the life of the believer.

The danger was, and is, very real. They, and we, could be lead astray from the things of Christ by humanistic speculation instead of building our faith on divine revelation. Either you look to human speculation or you base your faith on divine revelation.

There are two things in our text that Paul did. He first issued a warning, in verse 8. "Beware lest anyone cheat..."—or "spoil"—"...you." Then in verse 9, he prescribed a safeguard: "For in Him..."—that is, "Jesus Christ"—"...dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily."

First, let's look at the warning, in verse 8. "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men..."—notice that—"...according to the basic principles of the world..."—and here's the key—"...and not according to Christ." Paul was saying that the things the false teachers were sharing with the believers were not of Christ but were according to human wisdom, intellect, Greek philosophy and Jewish legalism.

Notice the word "beware." It is a present active imperative. So Paul is commanding us to be constantly, continually, habitually aware, to be looking around very carefully. Kenneth Wuest translates this, "Be constantly looking out. Keep a watchful eye, ever open." In Philippians 3:2, Paul says, "Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!" He is warning of the Jewish legalists who would lead people astray from the simplicity that is in Christ. Remember that even Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves." So even Jesus warned of this. And so much of the New Testament warns us of the preying of false prophets, who come to lead us astray.

In verse 8 Paul says, "lest anyone." So be on guard, be on the lookout, because "anyone" could be used by the devil to lead you astray. How do they lead people astray? By not pointing them to Christ.

The pastor's job is to preach the Word. But his job is also to warn the sheep about wolves and to protect the sheep from wolves. The word "pastor" is basically the word "shepherd." It's a Latin word. It means "to shepherd." Jesus is the shepherd of the sheep. And the pastor is an undershepherd. One of his main responsibilities is to protect God's people, the sheep, from false teaching, from wolves that come "in sheep's clothing."

It's not popular to warn about false prophets, false teachers today, but it's Biblical. Any pastor who is worth his salt, any pastor who is true to his calling, is going to warn God's people about false doctrine and false teachings that would lead them away from Christ.

Notice also that we, as believers, are to "Beware lest anyone spoil you." That is done without us becoming critical, judgmental or fault-finding. Jesus said, "Judge not, that you be not judged." That didn't mean we are not to be discerning. It didn't mean that we don't label false teaching as false teaching. But we are not to do it with a judgmental, censorious, critical, fault-finding attitude. You may not know a person's motive, but you can certainly judge their teaching as being true or false or consistent or not with God's Word.

Why is it so important to stay alert to false doctrine? Verse 8 says, "...lest anyone spoil you." The word "spoil" literally means "to carry you away as a captive." When a king would conquer a people, he would take slaves and carry them away. So "spoil" means "to take away as a slave." Don't let anyone kidnap you.

I've been kidnapped. Years ago when I was in Los Angeles, my friends and I were on our way to the airport. We made the mistake of going to a restaurant just outside the airport. When we came out of the restaurant, there were a couple of guys hiding behind our car in the dark parking lot. At gunpoint they took us captive, forced us back into the car, kept us for a couple of hours, held guns to our heads and threatened to kill us. I know the feeling of being held captive.

So Paul says, "Don't let anyone capture you. Don't let anyone steal from you or rob you." So kidnapping you is what he's talking about when he says "spoil" you.

Cults prey on weak believers. That's why in verses 6-7, Paul says, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught..."—that's sound doctrine—"...abounding in it with thanksgiving." Be thankful for the blessings you have in Christ.

It says, "You...have received Christ Jesus the Lord," so you're a Christian, and you are to "walk in Him." Then he uses these word pictures: "rooted," which speaks of a tree, and a believer has deep roots in Christ; "built up in Him and established in the faith" speaks of a building built on a foundation, strong on Christ's Word; "have been taught" speaks of a school where you are instructed in the things of Christ; and "abounding...with thanksgiving" is a picture of a river that is overflowing its banks with thanksgiving for the blessings that God has given you.

So Paul wanted them, as believers in Christ Jesus—they were Christians—to "walk in Him," or they were to be "rooted" and grounded and growing and bringing forth fruit. But the danger was that these false teachers or false philosophers and their teachings were going to lead them away from Jesus Christ.

How do cults and false teachers captivate weak believers? What are their methods? In verse 8, Paul lists five ways that they take people captive. First, it's through philosophy. The word "philosophy," in verse 8—this is the only place it appears in the Bible—literally means "the love of wisdom" or "to love wisdom."

In itself, there is nothing wrong with loving wisdom. But wisdom can be deceitful. The text says, "philosophy and empty deceit." This is talking about humanistic philosophy. That means that man is at the center of this philosophy; man is the answer to man's problems. God is out of the picture; He's not even in view. It is atheistic, humanistic philosophy apart from God.

These philosophers love wisdom, but they never arrive at the truth. The Bible says, "Professing to be wise, they became fools." It also says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" They reject God, pursue humanistic wisdom and become fools, rejecting the only source of truth and light in this world. So we are to be warned about humanistic philosophy.

This is what's called "rationalism" and "intellectualism." There is nothing wrong with being rational, and there is nothing wrong with being intellectual. But the Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." If you don't bring God into the equation, every intelligent thought comes to naught.

Why is it that we look to our culture today? I'm thinking in terms of politicians. Not all, but so many leaders of our nation, I think, have no brain in their heads. I'm constantly saying that anybody can get elected. I can't believe the people who are getting elected! They're leaders of our nation, "professing to be wise, they became fools." George Washington said, "It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible." And yet that's exactly what we've done; we've gotten rid of God and the Bible, and we've bought into this humanistic intellectualism, this vain philosophy. How marvelous it is to know the truth of God's Word! So be careful that you aren't ruined.

They're also known today as "progressive Christians." In years past, they were known as "liberals." They have a philosophy of "neo-orthodoxy" or "new orthodoxy," which is not orthodox Christianity at all.

So true wisdom starts with the fear of the Lord and centers on Christ and the Bible. To learn to discern, we must know God's Word. Sadly many today in the church are preaching the wisdom of the world and not the wisdom found in the Bible. Everything we've been studying today points to the fact that we must be grounded and growing in the Word of God.

The authority is not the preacher. The authority is not the church. The authority is not man's wisdom or man's intellect. The authority is the Bible.

"The B-i-b-l-e,

Yes, that's the book for me.

I stand alone on the word of God,

The B-i-b-l-e."

That's not just for kids to sing at Sunday school; we need to sing that in the adult service as well.

So don't be spoiled by philosophy.

The second way people can become captive by false teaching is by "empty deceit." This is another way by which Satan uses men to "spoil" people's Christianity, to lead them away from Christ. "Empty" or "vain deceit" is a description of the kind of philosophy that Paul is warning us about. It is "vain" or "empty" and it is deceptive. So this humanistic philosophy is empty, deceptive and void of spiritual truth, power, real hope and spiritual reality. Again, that's why we need God's Word.

In Jude 12, it says that these heretics are like "clouds without water." In this Temecula Valley, we get a lot of clouds, but we get very little rain. When my wife and I moved down here 10 years ago and came to Revival, we missed that it didn't rain a lot. But the clouds did come in. When we saw the clouds, we thought it was going to rain. We got all excited. But it didn't rain.

This is what these false teachers were like: “clouds without water.” They’re like empty wells. They don’t deliver. And J.B. Phillips renders Jude 12 as “high-sounding nonsense.” I like that. You hear them speak and you say, “Wow! I don’t even know what those words mean! That’s impressive.” They use big words because they don’t want you to know what they’re talking about. The truth is, it means nothing.

I’ve watched these guys on TV. They’re “clouds without water.” They’re all excited and good communicators, but they’re communicating emptiness. There’s nothing there. There’s no content, because it’s not the Word of God.

In 2 Timothy 4, Paul told Timothy, “Preach the Word!” That’s not hard to understand. Pastors should preach the Word—nothing more and nothing less. Read the Scripture, explain the Scripture and apply the Scripture. That’s what God wants you to do. And Paul said that the reason they need to preach the Word is because “The time will come when [men] will not endure sound doctrine.” That day has come to the church. “But according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” And Paul says to Timothy, “But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”

The number one calling of a pastor is to preach. The Greek word is “kerusso.” It means “to herald, to proclaim” God’s Word. Nothing more and nothing less; don’t add to it or subtract from it. Don’t set it aside. And certainly don’t—as they did in our Colossians context—substitute human wisdom or human speculation for it.

So either the source of your authority is your mind, your intellect, human speculation, described as “vain deceit,” or it is divine revelation, which comes to us in the Bible, in God’s Word.

The third way false teachers bring people into captivity is by the tradition of men. Verse 8 says, “according to the tradition of men.” So many times in the church today we are handing down tradition that is man-made and man created and not the Word of God. Tradition is only as good as it is consistent with and committed to the Bible. Tradition is not the authority. The Bible is. And if a tradition contradicts God’s Word, then we should set aside the tradition for the truth of the Bible. There may be traditions that are not essential, don’t bother anything and not contrary to God’s Word. That’s fine. But they don’t hold the place of authority that the Scriptures do.

This tradition was a man-made tradition, and Jesus warned us of replacing God’s Word with man’s traditions. He gave an example. The Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees said that the Bible says we should honor our parents, but they viewed the money they gave to God as a gift to Him, or “corban,” so they circumvented the commandment of supporting their parents and didn’t have to do what God’s Word said. By their traditions, they were circumventing the very Word of God and the commandments of God. And so many people today are following man-made, human traditions rather than the truth of God’s Word. So we must know the difference between tradition and divine revelation.

The fourth way false teachers captivate people is in verse 8, “the rudiments of the world.” Verse 8 says, “...according to the basic principles of the world.” This was used by Paul of anything that appeared in a row or sequentially or in a series. It was used of the letters of the alphabet. So some feel that Paul might be saying that in turning from divine revelation to human philosophy and speculation, it was going back to elementary things like the ABCs.

If you have graduated from college with a PhD, you’re not going to go back and start all over in kindergarten and learn your ABCs. So in reality, the false teachers were going backward rather than forward.

Others think that “the rudiments of the world” was talking about people worshipping angels. In verse 18, they thought they were humble by saying, “I can’t go directly to God, so I’ll go through one of the angels and work my way up to God.”

So the false teaching was a combination of Greek philosophy, which is covered by intellectualism; Jewish legalism—not touching certain things, eating only certain foods, worshipping on certain days, circumcision; and eastern mysticism. These are the same categories that today “spoil” Christians, because they turn away from Christ to intellectualism, legalism and mysticism.

Notice that in verse 8, Paul wraps it up, fifthly, by saying that these things are “not according to Christ.” That’s the problem. They’re not leading you into a deeper, stronger, more intimate relationship with Christ. They are actually showing Christ to be deficient, so these other things are needed as a help in your Christian life.

If you have Jesus, you have everything you need: knowing Him, loving Him and walking in Him. The false teachings are not after Christ.

I want you to notice it says that these things are “not according to Christ”; it doesn’t say “not according to Christ’s teaching.” Should we follow Christ’s teaching? Yes. But Christianity isn’t just following the teachings of Christ; it’s knowing Christ. Christianity is Christ. It’s a love relationship with Him and knowing Him. It’s not a creed or code of conduct.

J.B. Phillips renders verse 8, “Be careful that nobody spoils your faith through intellectualism and high-sounding nonsense. Such stuff is best found in men’s ideas of the nature of the world and is disregarding Christ.” So make sure you’re focused on Jesus Christ.

Ask yourself, “Do the teachings of Christ, of who He is and His truth, accord with the doctrine I believe? Is Jesus Christ the center and circumference of my doctrine and my relationship with God?” If you’re wrong about Jesus, you’ll be wrong about God. You can’t be right about God and wrong about Jesus. Your doctrine of Christ must be right.

1 John 2:23 says, “Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” If you reject the doctrine of Christ, that Christ has come in the flesh, you have not God.

Then what does Paul do? Secondly, in verses 9-10, he gives us the safeguard. First he warns us of the deficiency of man's philosophy, in verse 8, and now in verses 9-10, he gives us the safeguard of the sufficiency that is found only in Jesus Christ. "For in Him..."—that's a reference to Christ—"...dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." That is one of the greatest verses in the Bible on the Person of Christ. It's about His full deity and His full humanity. And verse 10 says, "And you are complete..."—that's the key word—"...in Him..."—that is, "Christ"—"...who is the head of all principality and power."

Paul had made three profound affirmations about Christ. So he was asking them, "Why are you worshipping angels and going to God through other mediators when you have Christ, who is the fullness of God in the flesh?" First, Paul said that we see Christ's full deity, in verse 9. "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." This is a clear and powerful affirmation of the deity of Jesus Christ. So the reason we should beware of the philosophy that is not after Christ is because Jesus Christ is God. If you leave Christ, you're leaving God. The word "dwell" literally means to permanently dwell. It's in the present tense. So Jesus Christ is the eternal God.

Secondly, in verse 9, we see Christ's true humanity. "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." The full deity dwells permanently in Christ bodily. So Christ is God.

Jesus was God in His preincarnate glory, Jesus was God in His incarnate humility and Jesus is God in His glorified majesty. There never was a time when Jesus was not God. There will never be a time when Jesus is not God. He is immutable, unchanging. He is the eternal God. But at the same time, He is fully God and fully man. He is two, full natures in one person, Jesus Christ.

John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word..."—or "logos"—"...and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." So here we see His full deity. In John 1:14 it says, "And the Word became flesh..."—that's the Incarnation—"...and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father; full of grace and truth." It was the same glory Jesus had with His Father before the world was ever created. How marvelous that is. So we have His deity and His humanity, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Third, we see Jesus' complete sufficiency. Verse 10 says, "And you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power."

This is one of the most important verses for Christians to know and understand. When you are born again, when you have received Christ and are regenerated by the Holy Spirit, you are taken out of Adam and put into Christ. As Christians, I think that we sometimes dismiss this doctrine of "in Christ" without really thinking about all its implications. In Adam, we had sin, death, condemnation and separation from God. But I'm out of Adam now and I'm "in Christ." I have His righteousness.

Ephesians 1 talks about being blessed "in the heavenly places in Christ." It says that God the

Father “chose us.” It says that God the Son redeemed us. It says that God the Holy Spirit has “sealed” us “until the redemption.”

Do you want some things to be thankful for? Just read Ephesians 1 in your Bible. You are chosen, redeemed and sealed by the Holy Spirit of God. Once you are “in Christ,” you are “in Christ” forever. Eternal life is eternal life. You don’t get eternal life when you die and go to heaven. You get eternal life the moment you are born of the Spirit of God. A Christian is a person who has the life of God in their soul. It’s not one who follows Christ’s teachings or goes to church on Sunday mornings, or takes communion, or is baptized or has a Christian haircut. Christianity is Christ.

When you become a Christian, you “know” the Lord. It freaks people out when you ask them, “Do you know the Lord?”

“Do you ‘know’ the Lord? You actually think you ‘know’ God?”

“Yeah, I do. It’s awesome!”

We used to sing an old hymn that says,

“And He walks with me and He talks with me,

And He tells me I am His own.

And the joy we share as we tarry there,

None other has ever known.”

When you become a Christian, you “know” Jesus Christ. And when you know Jesus Christ, you know God and you are “complete,” verse 10.

The word “complete” is a nautical term. It means “shipshape, fully rigged and ready to sail.”

I think sailing is awesome. The focus in my life has been surfing. I like the ocean. I’m in the transition period where my body isn’t letting me surf that much. It won’t do what it’s supposed to do. So I thought I could take up sailing. But it’s more expensive to buy a boat than a surfboard. But I like to see the sailboats on the ocean when the wind fills the sails, and the boat goes skimming over the water. It’s so cool.

But you never get in a boat that is leaking and go sailing. You want a boat that is shipshape, fully rigged and ready to sail with everything you need.

So when you become a Christian, you have everything you need. The idea is that you don’t grow by addition. You grow by appropriation. You don’t need human philosophy, psychology, Greek mysticism, Jewish legalism or what the cults have to offer. You have Christ. But all you

need to do is discover who Christ is, what Christ has done, what He has made available to you and what you have “in Christ.” Then start to appropriate what is yours “in Christ.”

Have you ever found money stuck in a drawer you didn't know you had? What a blessing that is. What a bummer it is when you needed it and didn't know you had it. How many times I found money in a sock drawer and thought, Oh, I needed that last week! It was right there under my nose!

Many Christians are going through their Christian lives not knowing what they have “in Christ.” Ours is to discover the riches and treasures that are hidden in Christ and that we are fully rigged, shipshape and ready to sail. So we just need to appropriate what is ours in Jesus Christ. How marvelous that is.

We are chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son and sealed by God the Holy Spirit. So we see His true deity, His true humanity and His complete sufficiency and adequacy. And every Christian is “in Christ.”

I've had some people argue with me and say, “Well, not all Christians are ‘in Christ.’” That's not correct; you cannot be a Christian if you are not “in Christ.” If you are “in Christ,” you're saved; you're shipshape, fully rigged and ready to sail. If you're not “in Christ,” you're lost, you're in Adam. There are only two places where you can be: you're either saved or not saved; you're either going to heaven or you're not going to heaven.

And you can't be “semi-saved.” The Bible says that before we were saved, we “were dead in trespasses and sins.” And then when we were saved, Jesus “made us alive.” There are no degrees of spiritual death; you're either dead in your sin or alive in Christ, in Adam or in Christ. Every Christian is complete in Christ. But out of Christ, you're in Adam and in condemnation.

So we are born into God's family complete, but we just need to grow.

When our oldest daughter, Sarah, was born, she had no hair. No biggie; a lot of newborns don't have any hair. It grows in a few months later. But she was over a year old and still didn't have any hair. So we had to use Scotch tape on her little, bald head. We used to tape a bow on her head so people knew this was a girl. But eventually the hair grew in, and now she has plenty of hair. When your baby is born and she doesn't have teeth, you don't freak out. They'll grow in. You're born with everything you need. You just need nourishment. That's the same with Christians.

So don't go looking, don't go searching for something else. “Well, maybe I need eastern mysticism. Or maybe I need some Jewish legalism. Maybe I need some humanistic philosophy.” No; you have Christ. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” He is adequate and sufficient for all you need.