

Colossians
Week 1
TexMex and Christianity

Welcome. Last week was Easter. Why do we celebrate that day so much? Simply put...

The center of our faith is a person.

- The center of our faith is not a location that we travel to.
- The center of our faith is not a temple or holy place where those near can be closer to god.
- The center of our faith is not a set of teachings or philosophies handed down, even delivered to a prophet.
- The center of our faith is not a set of practices or rituals. (Could go on here)

The center of our faith is a person. And he just so happens to be the most famous person in human history.

- More books have been written about him than any other person in history.
- More songs have been about him and to him.
- More controversies and debates and discussions and dialogue surrounding him than any other human who has ever lived.
- He is the most talked about, thought about, loved, hated, admired, despised person that has ever existed.

And the book of Colossians is a letter written to Christians who were in need of all sorts of encouragement and correction. And Paul, the author, believes the reminder that Jesus is the center of our faith was the primary thing they needed to be reminded of and instructed about.

To kick us off, if you have a Bible, we'll be in Colossians 1:1-14. We're going to start at the beginning today and set the stage for where the rest of the letter will take us.

Colossians 1:1-8

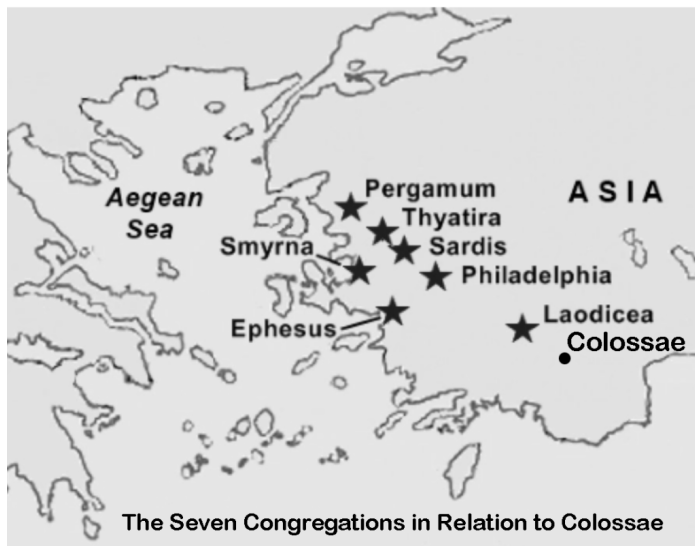
Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, [2] To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. [3] We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, [4] since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, [5] because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, [6] which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, [7] just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf [8] and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

First off, who's the author? Paul. Formerly an extreme zealot, out murdering Christians, he comes to faith in Jesus around 37-40 AD. And he becomes a missionary/church planter to primarily non-Jewish people throughout the Roman Empire. Most of the letters in the NT are written by Paul to churches he's planted, with Colossians being an exception.

We learn this small church is started by a guy named **Epaphras**, not Paul. Epap traveled to Ephesus, heard Paul preach, got saved, was mentored by him, and then carried the message back home and started up a little Christian community around 55 AD.

~~Which is pretty cool when you think about it. We don't know a ton about Epaphras outside of that, but here we're given a letter to a church planted by an ordinary guy who heard about Jesus, and the Spirit gripped him and he placed his faith in Jesus, and he was so compelled to say - I've gotta tell my friends and my neighbors about this. This is too good to keep to myself.~~

- to zoom out a bit. **Colossae was a mid-sized city** in the Roman Empire around 50,000 people - kind of like a smaller version of Greenville...yeah that Greenville. So not a big city, but definitely not a small town. And if you know me, you know I love a good excuse to show you a map, so I don't want to disappoint...BOOM.



So here's Colossae on the southern end of Asia - modern day Turkey. Ephesus is some 300-400 miles away. For some perspective, Jerusalem is not even on the map, it's waaaay down there - about 1,000 miles away. So in the course of about 20 years, the Gospel is spreading all throughout the Roman Empire.

Which is great news for the Kingdom of God, but if you're the Roman Empire, you're starting to sweat a little bit. Because the status quo was if you wanted to be a good citizen of the Roman Empire and reap all its benefits, there were some things you

had to subscribe to.

- And the number one rule you had to hold to be in good standing with the Roman Empire was this idea that said, "Look, worship whoever you want to worship. That's fine - Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, Jesus - sure. Go ahead and worship them all. But so we're clear, don't go acting like they're the only one with your worship. You all need to recognize Rome is your number one. Your gods you come to the table with, all well and good, but Rome gets the final say over your life."
- For most people in the Roman Empire, this was not a problem. At the time, Rome was the leading world superpower. Their power spread all the way from England to India. And their Empire lasted roughly about 1,000 years.
 - ~~To put that into perspective, America is coming up on our 250th anniversary. In Rome's eyes, our nation is still a kid, just learning how to drive compared to them.~~
 - Along with dominating about 1/3 of the planet, there was also about 50,000 miles worth of roadwork connecting nations and cultures in ways that were never connected before.
 - And I can't stress enough how huge that was. Having all those roads and highways connecting all these people together was, in a lot of ways, like how the

Internet was for us in the late 90s. Here's this whole world that beforehand you had no access to, and now, if you're a Roman, the world is just outside your front door.

- So when Rome says, worship whoever you want to worship - so long as Rome is your number 1 and we call the ultimate shots, this was a smart move on their part. People could still keep their gods, and retain their religious and cultural distinctiveness so long as they submitted to the Empire. They could even blend gods and worship practices together in ways that hadn't existed before. This was, in part, why Rome was able to survive as long as they did.

So now you've got this local church in a mid-sized city like Colossae - they love Jesus and they want to follow after Jesus together, and at the same time, they're also connected by all these ideas and cultures and religious systems from around the Empire. Which fwiw, can be a great thing, especially if you're a Christian, because that opens up all these opportunities for mission. That was partly why the early church was able to expand so quickly was because of all of these roads and highways connecting the world together.

- But at the same time you've got this spiritual buffet of sorts going on in the Empire that says, "Hey good news. You don't have to pigeonhole yourself to just one god - you can worship as many gods as you want."

And so you've got Epaphras, who's likely their pastor, who sees this and like a dad who's concerned over his kids, he's like, "Yea there's a lot of good here, but I've got some concerns. I need to talk to someone about this." And so Epaphras finds Paul, now in prison, and tells Paul about his concern for his people. About the cultural pressures going on and how some people, rather than being these little missionaries to Rome, are actually starting to look more like Rome than Jesus. They're getting influenced more by the Empire than they are by the Kingdom.

So here the church is faced with this dilemma. They want to be Jesus-centered, but at the same time there's these two temptations facing them.

You have this one extreme that all churches face, when faced with the pressures of the surrounding culture - is to just shut yourself off from the world completely. At the very least you ignore the culture and at most you vilify the culture and label the other side as the enemy.

This is what's called **sectarianism**. Forget the culture, we're gonna do our own thing.

This is a temptation every church faces. But when you do that, you lose your sense of mission. We lose our sense of what it means to love our neighbor if we're not engaging with what our neighbor thinks and believes. And if we lose our love for our neighbor, we lose our love for Jesus.

But then there's the other extreme that faces the church, that all churches face too. When faced with cultural pressures, rather than shutting yourself off, you cave into the culture. You compromise your beliefs and begin assimilating what the world believes into your Christianity, so as to make your faith more palatable to the world around you.

This is what's called **syncretism**. Where one side says "forget the culture" this side says, "wholesale accept culture"

This is the other temptation every church faces. And this is in fact the real danger creeping into the church of Colossae.

And the moment you do either - sectarianism or syncretism - you miss out on what it means to be Jesus-centered and in the process, you've lost what it means to be a Christian and follow Jesus.

Syncretism, like I said, is the real danger for this church Paul is writing to. He wants them to keep their focus on Jesus and not let the political tribes and ideologies of the day get them so swept up that in the process, they begin inserting those ideas into Jesus because when you do - you actually distort who Jesus is all about. ~~You've co-opted Him to be a spokesperson for your own set of ideological values and beliefs. You put him in a box and you don't allow Him to confront or correct. You've turned him into your own image and likeness - and it's no longer Jesus you're worshiping. You're worshiping yourself.~~

But this is the danger of syncretism, the blending together of ideas that in the end distorts what is actually true.

An illustration that comes to mind... whenever you've gone to a Mexican restaurant - which fwiw I would argue, might be THE best type of Sunday lunch to have - I don't care how dressed up the restaurant is, or how many mariachis are playing, or how many Spanish dishes are on the menu - I'm here to tell you, 95% of the time you're not actually eating authentic Mexican food. I can say this as somewhat of an authority here. It is a blending - if you will - of two ideas - Mexican and American. And now you have TexMex. But it's not really, actually Mexican food. Like, if I were to push you out of an airplane over the middle of Mexico and you ask for a Gordita Supreme with a side of queso. They might say, "No comprende." It's not the real thing.

But this is what happens when syncretism takes root. It's a blending of cultures and values and ideas. It makes for great food but terrible theology. When outside ideas creep into the church and all baptized with Christian lingo, and when that happens it's not really Jesus you're worshiping. You're worshiping your culture and your own ideas and values.

This happened in Jesus' day - with groups like the **Pharisees and the Sadducees**. Both major political forces at the time, and they wanted to co-opt Jesus to their tribe. This is why often, in the Gospels, both tribes will come up to Jesus with what seems like a yes or no question, when in actuality, what they're doing is lobbing him loaded questions to see if they're on their side or not.

- Jesus, should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?
- Jesus, who is my neighbor?
- Jesus, if a husband dies and the wife remarries, who will she be married to in the resurrection?

What's going on is they're saying - Jesus, whose tribe are you on? We know you're getting a lot of followers, and you're getting quite the platform, let's help you out. Are you on our team or not?

And time and time again, Jesus makes statements like “My kingdom is not of this world” or, “You have heard it said this, but I tell you this,” and my personal favorite, “You’re missing the point of what the Bible says.”

- Every time, Jesus refuses to be co-opted to a tribe because He is Lord over all. He refuses to fit in a box because He is King over the universe. He doesn’t need a PR makeover or a political platform, He already has the throne, and the call is whether you’re going to follow Him or not. Syncretism does not work.

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And yet, **this is what’s going on in the church at Colossae**. You’ve got political powers, and magic and mysticism, and different religions, all swarming around in this city. And you have this church figuring out what it means to be Jesus-centered and they’re encountering all these different ideas and they’re tempted with this pull that says, “Maybe we can blend them together. Maybe it’s not so big a deal if we pull this idea from this tribe and that tribe, and still be faithful Christians.”

- My pagan neighbor on the other side over here seems really happy in his marriage... he does some weird things with goat sacrifices and what not... but looks like it’s working... maybe I’ll add a little bit of that, too.
- I feel needlessly different... their way doesn’t seem to be hurting or harming anyone... I’ll do a bit of what they do and look at us? All getting along and coexisting... it’s almost like it all works!

And Paul is going to say, No that will not work. The moment you begin to blend is the moment you miss out on the person of Jesus.

And I would argue **every culture in human history** since the church’s inception has continued to do this - to take the cultural values of the day, the current tribes, the current ideologies and practices and co-opt Jesus to be a member of their tribe. It’s a blending - and it’s syncretism.

- And part of what makes it so tricky is, most every group and every tribe has some kernel of truth to it. Some more than others and this is what makes blending beliefs together so attractive.
 - And yet, when that happens, and you mix Jesus in with whatever ideology is in vogue, those results can at times lead to disaster

This is why when you look at church history, whenever you’ve seen Christians do something that’s off and it’s in the “name of Jesus,” I can almost guarantee it’s because The Church fell to syncretism. I’ll give you some examples.

- Think about the **Crusades**, lasting roughly 200 years during the Middle Ages when Christians and Muslims went to war with one another and left about 5 million people dead, and all “in the name of Jesus.” Now how on earth could that have happened?
 - And the answer is syncretism - because at that time, one of the most powerful cultural ideas was that of **imperialism**. Build an empire to ensure safety and security for your people - now to be clear safety and security are important things for sure. But the moment you begin to syncretize it with Christianity, suddenly what becomes a good thing like safety and security, becomes ultimate and things go off the rails quickly.

- Think about a couple of hundred years ago, **the forced dislocation of Native Americans** and indigenous people groups in America. Hundreds upon thousands of people were forced out of their lands, all under the banner of the “Doctrine of Discovery” that used Scripture to back it up. How did Christians mess that up so bad?
 - Once again, syncretism. The most powerful cultural idea was **colonialism**. We need to expand and explore and gather resources to ensure economic security for our people. Which again, that in and of itself is not bad - gathering resources and land. But once again, the moment you begin to co-opt Jesus to that ideology, then that idea becomes weaponized and things go bad.
- I’ll give you one more, it’s similar. Think about **slavery and racism** in our country. This idea that people are more or less human based on the amount of melanin in our skin, with hundreds of years ago many people in power and authority using the Bible to justify their actions. We can look at that now and see how disgusting it is.
 - And yet, this too was an act of syncretism because the powerful idea circulating was that of **capitalism**. We need to maximize profit and there’s all this land available. Not evil per se, in fact, we just taught a series about the importance of work and resources. But the moment you co-opt Jesus and use him as a means to justify your own agenda and greed, syncretism has set in and you’ve missed out.

Things go badly in human history when people try to co-opt Jesus to their tribe.

And over the course of four chapters, Paul is going to address his concerns more pointedly and unpack everything soon enough, which we’ll get to in weeks to come...but I think it’s fair to say Colossae is a lot like Columbia in more ways than one.

We’re a mid-sized city, connected in a lot of ways with a lot of cultural influences and social pressures facing us. Our heart for you all, is that you all love Jesus and pursue Him and that you would grow to be made more like Him. AND we recognize there’s this **temptation as a church for us to err in one of two ways.**

We can be sectarians - and be closed off to the world, but in doing so we would not be the salt and light that Jesus has called us to - we’d be disobedient to Jesus by not being missionaries in our city. So we need to be on guard about that because that’s a real temptation every church faces. And it might very well be the temptation you personally face.

- Rather, we want to be missionaries in our city who engage with the cultural values and ideas of the day - and agree with our neighbors when there’s things to agree AND disagree with love and respect because we want them to come to know Jesus.

Or we can be syncretists - and absorb the thousands of messages we hear day-to-day that are contrary to the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus - and we’d be denying Jesus slowly in the process. And that’s a real temptation too. To say things like, “Hey I know my neighbor believes differently, but it seems to be

working for them and it's not hurting anyone, so what's the big deal if I believe a little bit of what they believe too?"

- And the danger you face when you give into syncretism is you wind up telling people the solution to the world's deepest need is what they already think it is. Whatever the culture says is acceptable, well then let's make Jesus follow suit.
 - Culture's big on idolizing greed, sex, and \ relationships and affirmation. And like we said earlier, there are kernels of truth to all of those ideas. Money is not inherently evil but it can lead to all sorts of greed when it's ultimate. Sex is a good gift when it's used in accordance with its design. And we're called to love our neighbor no matter what - and we want our neighbors to repent of sin and turn to Jesus.

But the moment you absorb the idols of our day onto Jesus, you end up co-opting Jesus to your side, remaking Him in your image, and you end up getting images like these.



So is Jesus on the ideological left or the ideological right? Neither. He's King and in a category all His own. Is he sectarian or a syncretist? None of the above. He's the Savior of the world - the Savior for all people who bend the knee, whatever your affiliation, belief system, or orientation and He calls you to follow Him and His way of life.

Now between you and me - I'll go ahead and show my cards. Between syncretism and sectarianism in our church - I'm like 0.001% concerned about sectarianism and 99.999% syncretism.

Now we're going to unpack more as we go through this series, but for now suffice to say, Jesus is our King. We take Him at His word, the guy who rose from the dead - when He says I am the only way, we believe Him. This is why in our church's vision statement, we lead off first by saying we exist to be Jesus-centered in all things. We want to love our neighbor and be on mission with our neighbors and it also means we want to be on guard against the idols and ideas that are at there, and engage, and show our friends why those idols ultimately don't work - all the while clinging to Jesus because He is first in all things.

- Now the call to be on guard against syncretism in our present time means a whole bunch of things. I addressed a few of those, and we'll get into it more in future weeks...but to rattle off a few more, this means... Crystals have no power, your deceased relative isn't your guardian angel, Having a pet doesn't make you a parent...and your zodiac sign means absolutely nothing, so you can take it off your Instagram profile... we'll get into all that. Plenty of time to talk about that later... :)

Paul gives them the reason for how and why all of this is able to happen...

Colossians 1:13-14

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Why do we want to be Jesus-centered? Because Jesus, through His resurrection, has redeemed us from our sin. The problem within us was that we were so far gone, too caught up in idols and ideas of the world, and yet God so loved the world, that He sent Jesus on a rescue mission to save us by dying on a Cross and conquering death. And by His Spirit you are no longer a part of any Empire or ideology anymore.

You are part of the Kingdom of God now. You are a new creation. You're now given a new heart and a new mind, and by the Spirit - God is shaping you to think how He thinks. To feel how God feels. To love how God loves.

And because you and I are part of this new Kingdom that means we're distinct and set apart in the right sort of ways. We're set apart from the world, but we're not here to judge or look down on others, but to recognize that all of us fall short and all of us need Jesus and through being centered on Him and only Him are we given life to the fullest. And that's the trick. That's how you avoid either extreme. Yes, in the world's eyes we're weird but we're weird in the right ways. And that's not easy to do.

And how we navigate all of that is where Colossians is going to take us... but ultimately, it will come back to the reality that our faith is built on a person.

- do not put your flag in his hand.
- do not put your hat on his head.
- do not tag your slogan onto his kingdom.

As I said, we'll get into all of this, but it first starts with having this vision for your lives - of striving to be Jesus-centered in all things. And by the grace of God, I see this happening in us and I'm personally looking forward to how God will continue to work in us and through us as we learn from this book this summer.