

“Hold Fast to Christ, the Head” May 7, 2023

One of the reasons we think it's good to occasionally teach straight through books of the Bible is that it forces us to teach from passages that we would not teach from otherwise. And that's healthy for a lot of reasons, one of which is it helps us model how to interpret passages of scripture that are more confusing, or places where there is more cultural distance between us and the original audience. Remember that this book of the Bible called Colossians was a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a particular group of Christians who had particular issues they were dealing with.

We've been saying that one of the main things Paul is doing in the letter is protecting the Colossian church from “syncretism,” which is when God's people become too in sync with the culture around them, and incorrect beliefs or sinful practices end up inside the church family. Today we will get into some of the particulars of that issue within the Colossians church.

So go ahead and turn in your Bibles to **Col 2:8-23**. And before we get going, just let me tell you what we're going to do so that you'll track with me. In order to make sense of this passage, we are going to need to separate out the principle, the solution, and the particulars.

The Particulars. The Principle. The Solution.

The Particulars: These are the specific issues they were facing in their time and place. And they might not be the particular issues that we face in our time and place.

The Principle: Unlike the particulars, the principle is something that's always true in all times and all places.

The Solution: The solution is how to apply the principle. This also applies to everyone at all times, although the particulars may vary depending on the time and place.

Particulars, Principle, Solution. Could be a helpful breakdown for you as you study Scripture. I think it will help us make sense of our passage this morning.

Ok, in our passage today, Paul is actually going to start with the principle in v. 8, then he'll give us the solution from v. 9-15, and he'll end on the particulars of what's going on in their culture in v. 16-23.

We'll start in **verse 8**. And as I said, v. 8 will give us the principle.

8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

That's our **principle: See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit.**

This is the thesis statement of our passage today. In every particular time and place where Jesus' kingdom spreads, in every culture where the gospel goes, there are philosophies and ways of thinking that are contrary to and confronted by the gospel. Ideas that seem like common sense that don't align with reality as God designed it and don't align with the overlapping life where heaven and earth are realigning that Jesus intends to lead us into.

And he says these philosophies and empty deceits are not just passively present. They are actively working to take you captive. People are championing these ideas. Marketing these philosophies. Art and story are encapsulating these false realities about God and the world and human nature in potentially appetizing and compelling forms.

Ok, next Paul is going to cover the solution for how to obey this principle. How do we make sure that we are not taken captive to unreality and lies and things that go against Jesus?

I'm going to go ahead and give you the solution for clarity, and then we'll read through the verses to see how Paul paints the picture.

Solution: Remember Christ as the head of the body you now belong to.

9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

Notice the language there of Christ as the head. This has a double meaning because "head" means ruler or authority, like the "head of state," but later on, Paul will use body imagery as well. And obviously, the head is the control center of the body, it's what tells the body what to do, how to interpret things, and what to think.

11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

So in Judaism, circumcision was a primary way that you identified as one of God's covenant people. But now we have a new covenant identifier...

12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

So the logic is baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign and seal of the covenant for Jesus' people. Baptism signifies that you are identified with Jesus in His death and resurrection. So we celebrated baptism a few weeks ago on Easter, and the picture is each person baptized was buried, dead in their sin like Jesus was dead and buried... but now in Him, they have been raised with Him to new life. Exactly what Paul says next:

13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities[h] and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

You were dead in your trespasses, with all the weight of God's law bearing down on you, showing how many ways you have failed to keep it.

But God made you alive together with him, forgave you of all your trespasses when you had no power to deal with them on your own, and canceled every single accusation against you. He removed all of that condemnation from you by nailing it to the cross. If you are in Christ, the long list of sins you have committed are canceled, nullified, nailed to the cross, set aside, and never to be indicted again.

So retracing the logic of these verses, God has done all of this salvific work on your behalf that you could never do, and now you are with Christ himself. The one in whom the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. The one who nailed your sins to the cross and raised you with him, from death to life.

And you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

He is the head, the accomplisher of all these things. He is the reason why any of it occurred, and he alone made it happen.

So here is Paul's argument. ..Don't be taken captive by worldly philosophy or empty deceit...because you've already been taken captive in the best way imaginable. You've been purchased already by Christ. You've been raised with him through faith. You've been brought into his victory parade.

Or, as v. 10 says it, you've already been filled up in Him, so you don't need a new philosophy selling you a different way to be filled up.

You've got the real thing. You don't need the counterfeit. Anything or anyone that is selling you the good life, offering you a new way of thinking... Jesus, our Head is the measuring stick.

And now he's gonna pivot into the **particular** philosophies and empty deceits the Colossian church was in danger of being taken captive by.

16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions,[d] puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, 19 and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 21 “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” 22 (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

You and I live 2,000 years removed from this original audience, so of course, our particulars aren't exactly the same as theirs. But let me summarize some of the primary forces that were pulling these Christians in different directions:

Particulars: Legalism, Mysticism, Asceticism

Legalism (v.16-17)

Colossae was primarily a Gentile city, but this force came more from a Jewish influence. Verses 16-17 say: 16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

These are references to Jewish practices and how many of those rituals Christians needed to practice. This is a big theme through the New Testament, where over and over again, it's asserted that Christ was the fulfillment of shadows that were meant to point to him. So there is no need to continue practicing the shadow when the real has now come.

The basis of legalism was observing laws to earn God's love, and the gospel did away with that for good. So Paul tells them that they need to see that for what it is, worldly, empty, untrue. And therefore need to reject it.

Mysticism (v.18)

This force came more from the pagan or Gentile direction. V.18 says: 18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions,[d] puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

Where legalism is all about the rules, mysticism is all about the experience. You want to be awesome like me? I've had visions. I see angels. There's an arrogance that comes from some who think because they've experienced more, they are superior.

It's likely what we see here in this passage are some of the seeds of a heresy that would grow in prevalence through the early church called Gnosticism. Gnostic comes from the Greek word for “intellectual” or “learned,” and this heresy became a pursuit of personal “spiritual knowledge and wholeness” over and above orthodox teachings and authority of religious institutions.

Gnosticism was all about hidden, spiritual knowledge. It was not a belief system of sin and repentance, but of illusion and enlightenment. Salvation was found through enlightenment, and the material world, including the body, was thought to be flawed or evil. So the more you detached from the material world and the more you experienced visions of angels and the heavens, the more superior you were. But for Christians, Jesus came from the highest heaven and descended to the depths of hell. My hope is not in what I experience, but in what Jesus has experienced on my behalf for me. Therefore this way of thinking needs to be rejected.

Asceticism (v.20-23)

Ok, where legalism is about following the right rules, and mysticism is about experiencing the right spiritual experiences, Asceticism is about punishing yourself to grow spiritual maturity. It's the practice of abstaining from things to earn merit with God. It's a cousin of legalism and gnosticism that focuses on harshness to the body to cultivate the spirit. That's what Paul's talking about in v 21 “Do not handle, Do

not taste, Do not touch”. And I love how he says these things can have the appearance of spiritual wisdom... but they are of no real value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

Ok, does that philosophy -- the idea that I have to punish myself with harsh physical restrictions to make myself righteous -- does that measure up to Jesus, who is my Head? No. In the gospel, Jesus has already endured the punishment I deserved on my behalf. And the way to growth is that Jesus gives me a new heart that loves him and progressively sanctifies me as I follow him.

Transition

Ok, I'd like to transition us now from their particulars to our particulars. And remember, our principle here is:

Principle: See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit.

Like I mentioned before, we need to heed this principle with a lot of seriousness. With all the contours of modern life, you are now surrounded by more false teaching than any humans ever. We hear more philosophies and empty deceits in a single day than a person this letter was written to would have heard in their entire lifetime.

For example, if I had to guess, I'd say 90%+ of our music is false teaching set to song. It's worldly philosophy and empty deceit, but with a killer beat and catchy hook. So we need to be aware of who and what we give persuasive voice and power in our lives. We can't afford to be mindless consumers of podcasts, tv, videos, and social media content. Because overtly and subtly, they are all full of worldly philosophies and empty deceit.

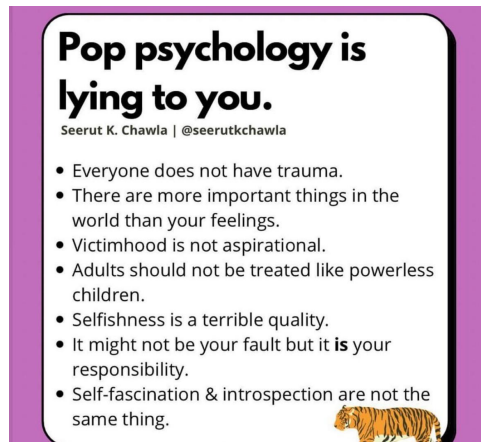
And I would like to note that here, in our passage, Paul directly confronts specific false beliefs. He calls them out by name. He is helping them look at their culture and discern what is good vs what should be rejected. And he does not tiptoe around it. As this church read this letter from Paul, written to them, I imagine there was some awkwardness in the room because he was calling out things that some of these folks had begun to believe. He even uses quotes. Like when Paul says, “Hey, let's be done with that ‘don't taste, don't touch’ nonsense,” someone looked at a friend and said, “You just said that very quote at LifeGroup this week! Paul called you out!” Paul is seriously stepping on toes here.

So I'd like to do the same thing for us in our culture. And while, unlike Paul, this isn't inspired, I hope it will still be insightful for you as you discern how to follow Jesus in our particular cultural moment:

Particulars (for us): Some not inspired, but hopefully insightful ideas

I'll just mention 3.

Pop-Psychology—Let me show you something that a licensed therapist who is a member of our church sent in. It's a screenshot of something someone posted on Twitter, so you know it's true.



And this therapist who sent it was saying, “I see this kind of stuff everywhere. When I sit down with people, this is the sort of stuff I’m dealing with; and I have to say, “Ok, let’s deconstruct some of that from a biblical worldview,” and it’s a huge part of the work I have to do as a Christian therapist.

When thoughtful understandings of the psychology world are integrated into a Christian worldview, with the Christian worldview retaining prominence, there can be all kinds of benefits. On the other hand, if pop-psychology becomes the dominant worldview, it is incompatible with Christianity.

Because that kind of immature, imprecise philosophy teaches that you are not ultimately a sinner, but a victim. It says the biggest problem in the universe isn’t sin, but trauma. And the path to salvation isn’t through repentance and faith, but through self-acceptance, self-discovery, and an endless amount of very expensive sessions.

One of the saddest, most harmful aspects of it is that it positions the solution to all my problems as coming from inside of me. I need to learn about me. I need to forgive myself. Express myself. Accept myself. It’s all up to me, and no outside help is available. Jesus has such a better solution, and it comes from outside of ourselves.

The hope is not me learning to love and forgive myself; Jesus has loved and forgiven me already. All of that actually needs to come from outside of me. Love, forgiveness, and identity are found in their proper source from he who created us and designed us for nothing less than his fullness. Looking to ourselves for any of that will only leave us empty.

Political Messaging—I remember a few decades ago, authors and conference speakers were concerned about rising religions and what might threaten Christianity. Would it be Islam coming on the rise in the West?

Hindsight is 20/20 because that hasn’t been the case here in our experience. At some point in the last few years, I had this thought, and I was like, “Oh, it was right under our nose and we missed it.” Because it kind of feels to me like the dominant religions in the United States right now are blue and red. These teams become all-encompassing and all-demanding. You accept the party, the platform, the figures, the warts, and you close your eyes. It demands unflinching loyalty.

I heard on a podcast recently how the Boomer generation is retiring and aging, and they just so happen to be the biggest givers to the church nationwide. So churches are figuring out, “Uhoh, we’re in trouble.” And this church leader said the thing younger churches and church leaders are realizing is that the easiest way to address this glaring problem staring them in the face is to lean hard right or hard left. To give the people what they want. Because that’s a church growth strategy if you can give people their idol but then call it Christianity.

We have never told people who to vote for and try to maintain prophetic distance from the fray. We just want to teach the Bible, teach the issues, and shape the collective conscience and wisdom of our people so that we act with God’s purposes in mind in our world, all the while having our eyes trained on an eternal kingdom most of all.

But, please hear me; if you are so intertwined into your political affiliation that you can’t identify meaningful areas or issues that Jesus might disagree with, I think that’s cause for concern. If Jesus has not spoken a single corrective word to your political leanings, I fear you may not be listening.

The solution for us is the same for us as it is for them—stay connected to the head. Let him tell you what to think, not a talking head on TV whose job is to make you fearful or angry so you'll keep watching.

Depending on where and when you live, that might mean you are somewhere in the political middle, more on one side or the other, or off the map completely, where all sides would look at you and think you are crazy.

If you are in Nazi Germany, don't be balanced, don't be a moderate, don't be a centrist. That's not it. Contexts and times will be different, so the goal can't be as simple as "be moderate." Don't fall into the trap that the Christian view is always centrist. You can't just let them pick the sides and then try to find the middle of whatever they picked.

The goal is to hold fast to the head, who is Christ, and stand firm wherever that puts you in your family, in your workplace, in your country, in your time and place, no matter what difficulties that brings with it. Don't let a talking head tell you what to think. Instead, feel the freedom to look around at the voices calling to you and say, "I don't need to join your kingdom; I already have one."

Modern-Day Gnosticism— Let's end with a thump. You ready? I read a description of the heresy of Gnosticism that plagued the early church. I would like to recount exactly what I said about that heresy: *Gnosticism was all about hidden, spiritual knowledge. It was not a belief system of sin and repentance, but of illusion and enlightenment. Salvation was found through enlightenment, and the material world, including the body, was thought to be flawed or evil.*

I don't have space to nuance this as I usually try to, but I would argue that the worldview surrounding current gender ideology in our time and place has a lot of overlap with this ancient heresy. Hidden, spiritual knowledge of who I really am on the inside of me. My body might be flawed or evil or out of line with good internal knowledge of who I really am, and therefore my body could be keeping from enlightenment and wholeness inside where I am good and pure and right.

The modern gender paradigm holds a negative view of embodiment that we wouldn't accept in any other area. It says the human body is flawed, and it debases or defaces the image of God in the human body in hopes of a spiritual or mental outcome. And listen, in absolutely no other way would we even dream of telling a child that their body was the problem that was causing all of their internal issues. Imagine telling a child that the root of all their problems is that they are ugly. Your body is the problem. All of your lack of wellness is because you are physically unattractive. In any other issue of physical embodiment, it would immediately sound evil because it is evil.

But instead of that, we have big pharma come alongside them and say don't worry, we have expensive procedures and lifelong medical treatment from which we profit immensely, and those will solve the problem that is your body. Your body is not a problem to be solved. Your body has been fearfully and wonderfully made by God. Your body is beautiful and good and is a temple because the very presence of the Spirit of God dwells within it, if you are in Christ.

Again, these are not inspired, but my best attempt to shine some light on what a few of our particulars may be. I'm sure you could come up with a bunch more. And I imagine that if Paul were to write a letter to the Columbia area in 2023, **he might say something like the following:**

To the church in Columbia. Don't be taken captive by worldly philosophies and empty deceit. But instead, stay connected to Christ, who is the head. The problem with the world is not simply trauma. We're all victims in some ways, and we're all sinners in some ways. And the solution to your problems does not come from inside of you, but from outside of you. From Christ, who is your head.

And don't buy the hype that you have to pick red or blue and that one side is the good guys and the other side is evil. Stay connected to the head and remember your primary allegiance is with a different kingdom.

And finally, your body is not a problem. Your body has been fearfully and wonderfully made. And whether it's about gender or anything else, you do not have some secret hidden identity deep inside of you that you must discover and then express at all costs. Your identity is that you belong to Christ, who is your head. Your body displays his stamp, his glory. You're a member of his household, his body. Hold fast to Christ, who is your source of life and sanity and refuge amidst all the voices calling out to you. Hold on to HIM. He is the head, from whom we all, as the whole body, are nourished and knit together.

Don't let any other voice take you captive for its interests. Don't let any philosophy become your guide. Don't allow any worldly way of thinking to take precedence in your life. Hold fast to HIM.

He tells us what to think, even if it puts us at odds with very important voices to us. He fills us when every other deceit will leave us empty. And if he is the head, if he is supreme—he better be able to contradict any other team you identify with. In a place where big feelings are attached to every hot-button issue, let Christ help you navigate faithfully through all of those big feelings.

So don't go to one of these many vendors of empty philosophy and let them tell you how to think. That's Christ's job. Don't go elsewhere to get your marching orders for how to rightly live on this Earth. That's Christ's job.

And don't let the many voices around you splinter the unity of the body of Christ. Don't let these lesser causes sever you from one another, because the body is meant to grow together, nourished and knit together with a beautiful, unifying growth that comes only from God.

And why wouldn't we hold fast to this head, this Christ... considering that to raise us with him required the bowing of his literal head on the cross? It required a crown of thorns to be placed on his head. His head was bowed in sorrow, in pain—and ultimately stilled in death. Not to move itself or his body again until 3 days later when his head was lifted in glory.

What a beautiful head for us to hold fast to.