

**Mark 15:21-39**

**Colossians 2:6-19**

**July 24, 2022**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **CHRIST ALONE, CROSS ALONE**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

When we were studying the apostle Paul and his writings in seminary, one day our professor said, “Reading and understanding Paul’s letters is a lot like peeling an onion. When you peel back one layer of Paul’s thoughts, you find several more layers that you have to pull apart.” Then he added, “And it can also make you cry!” Dr. Achtemeier and untold readers of Paul over the last 2,000 years would surely agree with 2 Peter 3:15b-17, written only fifteen to thirty-five years after Paul penned his letters: “So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. ***There are some things in them hard to understand***, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.”

You might have felt like crying or found Paul hard to understand as you listened to this morning’s epistle lesson. Paul probably dictated his letters to a scribe, such as Tychicus who might have written down the letter to the Colossians. Imagine Paul pacing around, dictating in a rapid-fire manner, and Tychicus trying his best to keep up. The introductory notes in my study Bible describe Colossians as “composed of long, complex sentences that the New Revised Standard Version breaks into shorter segments for clarity.” Verses 8-15 in the Greek contain seven dependent clauses: semicolon, comma, comma, comma, semicolon, semicolon, semicolon, period. You have to go all the way back to verse 7 to remind yourself what it was Paul was talking about to begin with!

In 1523, William Tyndale began translating the New Testament from Greek into English. Tyndale had to flee to Germany in 1524 when church authorities would not allow him to translate the Bible into English. In 1525, supported by wealthy London merchants, his first English translation of the New Testament was published in Cologne, Germany. When his English New Testament reached England, it was prohibited by the church. In 1530, he published the first five books of the Old Testament in English. However, he was captured in Antwerp before he could complete his translation of the Old Testament and was strangled to death, then burned at the stake in 1536 for heresy – all so that, in his words, “the boy that driveth the plough” would be able to read the Scriptures.

Tyndale’s translation is a vivid illustration of why we have different versions of the Bible. Translators work with better tools and ancient manuscripts to help all of us be better able to read and understand the Scriptures, even and especially when there are some things in them hard to understand. One such translation is *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. In his introduction to *The Message*, Peterson wrote about why he

produced this translation: “Virtually anyone can read this Bible with understanding. The reason that new translations are made every couple of generations or so is to keep the language of the Bible current with the common speech we use, the very language in which it was first written.”

Listen while I read Peterson’s translation of Paul’s words to the Colossian believers in 2:6-19. Hearing these fresh words might help us understand what Paul said 2,000 years ago and why it is still so vitally important for us as believers 2,000 years later.

“My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you’ve been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now *live* him. You’re deeply rooted in him. You’re well-constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you’ve been taught. School’s out; quit studying the subject and start *living* it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.

“Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double-talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that’s not the way of Christ. Everything of God gets expressed in him, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don’t need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends overeverything. “Entering into this fullness is not something you figure out or achieve. It’s not a matter of being circumcised or keeping a long list of laws. No, you’re already *in*—insiders—not through some secretive initiation rite but rather through what Christ has already gone through for you, destroying the power of sin. If it’s an initiation ritual you’re after, you’ve already been through it by submitting to baptism. Going under the water was a burial of your old life; coming up out of it was a resurrection, God raising you from the dead as he did Christ. When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ’s cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.

“So don’t put up with anyone pressuring you in details of diet, worship services, or holy days. All those things are mere shadows cast before what was to come; the substance is Christ.

“Don’t tolerate people who try to run your life, ordering you to bow and scrape, insisting that you join their obsession with angels and that you seek out visions. They’re a lot of hot air, that’s all they are. They’re completely out of touch with the source of life, Christ, who puts us together in one piece, whose very breath and blood flow through us. He is the Head and we are the body. We can grow up healthy in God only as he nourishes us.”

From the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century came what are called “The 5 Solas” (*sola/solus* being the Latin for “alone”). The core principles and beliefs of

Protestantism can be summed up this way: “Christians are saved by **grace alone**, through **faith alone**, in **Christ alone**, as revealed by **Scripture alone**, to **the glory of God alone**.” Notice that “Christ alone” falls right in the middle of the 5 Solas. That certainly is in keeping with what we heard last Sunday from Colossians 1:17: “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

From 1940-1943, Dietrich Bonhoeffer worked on a book about Christian ethics. He wasn't able to complete his work because he was arrested by the Nazis and executed in April 1945. The fragments of his writing were published in 1949. Bonhoeffer rejected thinking of life in terms of two spheres, a way of thinking that would separate our Christian faith from other areas of our lives. In his Christian ethics, he wrote, “In Jesus Christ the reality of God entered into the reality of this world. The answer both to the question concerning the reality of God and to the question regarding the reality of the world, is designated solely and alone by the name Jesus Christ. Henceforward, one can speak neither of God nor of the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concerns of reality which do not take account of him are abstractions.”<sup>1</sup>

Christ Alone, Cross Alone – that's one way to sum up what Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians. Although we're not exactly sure what the false teachers were teaching the new believers in Colossae, it seems they were telling them something like, “Unless you add to your faith in Jesus Christ things like performing certain rituals, coming to know certain special knowledge, observing special feasts and celebrations, having visions, dietary restrictions, etc., your faith in Christ is not as full as it can be.” Maybe they even implied that the faith of the Colossian believers wasn't a “true” or “legitimate” faith.

Oh, the particulars might have changed over the last 2,000 years, but the circumstances are still the same. How do you remain faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ when you are surrounded on all sides by claims to supplement your faith in Christ with this behavior or that belief? Unless you were baptized in this particular manner, your baptism is not valid? Unless you practice these certain rituals in these certain prescribed ways, your faith in Christ is not “true” or “legitimate”? The list goes on and on. As one commentator puts it, “In chapter 2 the writer invites the Colossian believers to . . . to live or ‘walk’ in Christ [There's that phrase again – Walk the walk, walk the talk, live worthy of the Lord!], which means, in part, rejecting rival narratives that compete for their imaginations.”<sup>2</sup>

I can't identify what are the specific rival narratives that compete for your imaginations, although I'm sure we all share many in common. The apparent dilemma is twofold: Either we think we need to add something of our own making and doing to the good news about Jesus's death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead in order to experience the fullness of God's salvation OR we think there may be areas of our lives in which Jesus Christ is not completely Lord, if at all. Paul's exhortation to the Colossians is just as timely for us: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” (Colossians 2:6-7)

The good news for the Colossians and the good news for us is this: “And when you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them on it.” (Colossians 2:13-15) The irony of the good news is that on the cross Jesus defeated all of the rival narratives that compete for our imaginations, that make us think we need to add to what Christ has already done for us on the cross or that Christ is not Lord of ALL life.

Imagine a parade in honor of a victorious Roman general. If you were in the jubilant crowd, you would first see the humiliated captives of war, probably bound in chains and destined for a life of servitude. Next you would see gaudy displays of the loot and booty captured by the Roman soldiers, including plants and animals from the conquered territory. Then you would spot the victorious general in his chariot decorated with gold and ivory. He would be dressed in a fancy red or purple toga. His face would be colored red to imitate Mars, the Roman god of war. Sometimes the winning general would be seen as a divine representative of the chief god Jupiter. Marching behind the general’s chariot come the crack Roman legions, dressed in their finest battle armor.

Let’s go back to the general’s chariot, for there is someone in the chariot with him. The Roman Senate would appoint a slave to accompany the general in his victory parade. The slave would hold a gold crown over the general’s head, but he would also whisper in the general’s ear, “Memento mori,” which can be translated “Remember, you are mortal” or “Remember, you must die.” It was an attempt to reign in the general’s ego and ambitions.

Now, imagine a different kind of victory parade, where a triumphant King shows off his vanquished opponents. Only this time, the King looks more like a wounded healer than a Roman general in the chariot, resplendent in his fine toga. But there are two major differences between the two parades. First, the King is preceded by his vanquished foes such as empty human traditions, ritual acts, dietary restrictions, rulers and authorities and sin and death. But the victorious King is followed by people who have been set free from all of those rival narratives to live a new life because of what the King has done for them. Second, there is no need for anyone to whisper in the King’s ear, “Remember, you must die.” You see, this victorious King has already died on the cross and been raised to life, never to die again. And it is through this King’s death that all other powers and authorities and rulers and rival narratives that compete for our imaginations have been defeated. Because of Christ alone, because of the cross alone, we can bear fruit in what we do. We can walk in him. We can continue to live our lives in him. If we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of ALL life, then we must let our lives show it.

Here’s how Billy Graham put it: “To know about Christ is not enough. To be convinced that He is the Savior of the world is not enough. To affirm your faith in Him

as we do in the Apostles' Creed is not enough. You really don't believe in Christ until you make a commitment of your life to Him and receive him as your Savior."<sup>3</sup>

Or, in the words of Paul, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." (Colossians 2:6)

***Let us pray: Almighty God, look with mercy on your children for whom our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to be betrayed and to be given over to the hands of sinners and to suffer death on the cross. Strengthen our congregation in our work and worship. Fill our hearts with your self-giving love that our lives may conform to the image of your Son and we may walk in his way; for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 194.

<sup>2</sup>Ryan Schellenberg, "Commentary on Colossians 2:6-15 (16-19)," July 24, 2022 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>3</sup>Billy Graham, quoted in *Distilled Wisdom* by A.A. Montapert (Borden Publishing Company, 1965).