

STUDY 6 – COLOSSIANS 2:16-25

SO FAR

In the previous section what we have “in Christ” has been emphasised – we have fullness in him, because united to him through his death and resurrection the power of sin in us has been broken, our sin has been forgiven, and in him the evil powers have been triumphed. Now Paul moves on the contrast this reality with the false teaching which has entered the church in Colossae, and shows that these teachers do not take seriously our union with Christ.

THIS SECTION

In this section the false teachers who have been in the background in the letter so far (see 2:4, 2:8) come to the fore. Paul draws the Colossians’ attention to the false teaching they are hearing, and points to why it is so dangerous.

Much ink has been spilt by bible commentators trying to work out precisely what the false teaching is. It is best not to spend much time worrying about the specifics – God in his wisdom has kept it vague, so it has application to every generation of Christians.

In general there are 3 characteristics

- Religious observance, but without Christ (vs 16-17)
- Spiritual experience, but without Christ (vs 18-19)
- Rule-keeping, but without Christ (vs 20-23)

The great shock of all these verses is that although the false teachers in Colossae are claiming to give freedom and maturity, in reality they are the ones who are enslaved to the flesh, the world, and are full of pride. Only Christ has brought new life and set us free from the world, only he has the power to produce growth and holiness in us.

However don’t just focus on the negatives in these verses! Paul gives very positive teaching about how to grow as Christians, which he will expand on in chapter 3.

NOTES

16. Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.

The false teachers are calling the Colossians back to keep Jewish religious laws about diet and special days. They were probably not denying Christ, but saying something like “now you are a Christian and saved by Christ, you need to keep these laws”.

17. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Paul stresses that by keeping the laws of verse 16 you are in fact denying the supremacy of Jesus Christ. The Jewish laws were shadows cast backwards through history by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To still be keeping those laws is to deny that Jesus Christ, their fulfilment, has come.

18. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.

Another aspect of the false teaching was an impressive spirituality which included worshipping angels and great visions. This may seem very spiritual and the individual may appear to be very humble, but in reality he is “unspiritual” and “puffed up”, as he is exalting himself in other peoples eyes, rather than exalting Christ. It is especially wicked as this kind of spirituality disqualifies the ordinary believer who has not had these experiences. However Paul has already stated in 1:12 that we are qualified to share in the inheritance by God the Father through Christ.

19. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

Such an individual has lost connection with Jesus Christ – the head of the church (see 1:18). Christian growth only comes by God through connection to him, not through worship of angels. The body of Christ is not built up and nourished together by those who disqualify others.

20. Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules:

21. “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? 22. These are all

destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.

Another aspect of the false teaching is that there is a kind of legalism which believes that if you keep particular rules (especially with regard to external things – touch, taste) you will be free from sin. Paul says this is a wrong mindset for the Christian – it forgets we are completely new people in Christ, so we do not deal with sin by focussing on the body, or on external regulations – which are human commands so of only limited, temporary, rather than eternal, value.

23. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

It always seems impressive to treat the body harshly – throughout history there have always been ascetics and monks who appear spiritual because they deny themselves food, or company, or sex, but in reality that does no good. They only deal with the symptoms of sin, not the root problem. External laws do not change the heart, and can have negative side affects – they puff those who keep them up with pride (“their false humility”) rather than producing true humility by focussing our attention on Jesus Christ.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Remember to ask a recap question, particularly to cover 2:6-15.

What attitude is being displayed amongst some people in Colossae (vs 16-17)? Over what issues?

What have these people missed in their understanding of the food and festivals (vs 17)? Why is it foolish to go back to the shadows when the substance is here?

What is the appeal of the things mentioned in verse 16? Are there any parallels to temptations we may face today?

What attitude is being displayed in verse 18? Over what issues?

Look at 1:12-13. Why is it so evil to disqualify other Christians from the prize?

What does Paul say lies behind this false spirituality? How does it differ from how these people appear?

How should the church grow? (vs 19)

What are the Colossians doing in verses 20-23?

Why is this wrong?

Why are these kinds of rules attractive to us? Why don't they work?

STUDY 7 – COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

SO FAR

In chapters 1 and 2 Paul has been teaching the reality of the church's unity with Christ, and the foolishness of moving away from him. In 2:16-25 he has highlighted some of the false teachings about living the Christian life that the Colossians have to contend with, and now he stresses the positive way to live and grow as people united to Christ.

THIS SECTION

This study is deliberately short in terms of amount of verses because it is so central to the whole letter. Paul stresses positively how we are to live the Christian life, and it is it through recognising who we are and where we are (united to Christ who is seated at the right hand of God) and by setting our hearts and thoughts on him, recognising that who we really are will only fully be revealed when Christ comes again.

NOTES

- 1. Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.*

Although this is a new chapter in our bibles, Paul is continuing his argument from chapter 2. We do not grow as Christians by submitting to earthly rules (2:20-23), instead we recognise that we

are united to Christ having died with him, and so have been raised with him (remember 2:6-15). As Sinclair Ferguson has put it – “All that Jesus has done for us belongs to us in such a way that we can say we are with him in all he is and does”.

Paul can describe our resurrection with Christ as being a past act. Our link with this present earthly (sinful) order have already been severed, and we are now linked to a new and heavenly order.

However we are not perfect yet so as we live this out in the world and in our earthly bodies we must “set our hearts” (or simply “seek” – desire and pursue) “things above”, which Paul defines as “where Christ is seated”. We are to seek Christ, pursue him, rather than the things the false teachers are seeking in 2:16-25. The more we pursue him the more we will become like him in every area of life. The rest of chapters 3 and 4 will show that this is not an airy-fairy heavenly mindedness which has no connection to the reality of life.

2. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

As in Romans 12, Paul tells us that a key to Christian maturity lies in the mind. We must think of Christ. This is not stressing our intelligence level, but our mindset – do we prize Christ? Do we think about him? Do we love him most? Or is our mind full of this worlds values?

3. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Again, the reason for the actions of verses 1 and 2 is given. We don’t do those things to gain acceptance with God, but because we are already new people. We have died – to the old life, to the world (as it is defined in the bible as being opposed to God). Our new life is “hidden” – just as not everyone recognised who Christ truly was, the same will be true for us. However, God knows.

4. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

This “hiddenness” will not be forever. One day who we really are will be fully revealed, as who Christ is will be fully revealed. One day Christ and us will appear in glory. Notice again how close the unity is between Christ and his people “Christ, who is your life”.

There is great re-assurance in verses 3 and 4. We could not be any more secure than being “hidden with Christ”. Our salvation is certain. Our future is certain.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

How do these 4 verses relate to what has gone before (particularly 2:16-25)?

What are we told about our identity in these verses?

- *What has happened to us? Why?*
- *Where are we now?*

What do we do now?

What are the “things above” we are to set our minds and hearts on?

Practically, how do we do this?

Is it obvious who we are at the moment (vs 3)?

When will we be seen to be the people we really are (vs 4)?

What difference does knowing the truths in verses 3 and 4 make to our lives now?

STUDY 8 - COLOSSIANS 3:5-11

SO FAR....

Although this is the most practical section of Colossians we must never separate it from what has gone before. The problem of the false teachers in Colossae is that they are separating Christian growth and obedience from Christ (2:16-25). Paul has continually stressed in chapters 1 and 2 that the way into the Christian life is the way on (particularly 2:6-7).

In chapter 3 Paul has begun to show how we live as Christian in a Christ centred way. We remember who we are – new people in Christ, raised with him. As a result we set our minds and hearts on things above, and remember that who we truly are will be fully seen when Christ comes and we appear with him in glory.

THIS SECTION

In this section Paul teaches us very practically how to deal with sin. Setting our hearts and minds on Christ will lead us to put to death every action which belonged to our old self. In a sense we are walking contradictions while we live on this earth – new people in Christ, but still sinning. Sin will be always present in the Christian, but it is never “normal”/what we should be.

The particular sins Paul focuses on here are the root sins of idolatry which is expressed in sensuality (verse 5), and our attitudes to one another expressed through anger and speech (verses 9-10). Throughout this section we are reminded of who we are in Christ, and the unity we have as the church in Christ (vs 11).

NOTES

5. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

Because we are united to Christ, raised with him (3:1) setting our hearts and minds on him will lead us to take radical action on our sin. Don't miss the connection with 3:1-4 and the preceding 2 chapters!

We have died with Christ (2:9-15) so we now kill those attitudes and actions which belong to our old life (our “earthly nature” our unregenerate, sinful nature), not our new life in Christ. While we live on this earth we are new people, but we still have sinful natures which will pull us to sin. Yet we are freed from its power. Read Romans 8:1-11 for more detail on this. We will never be perfect and sinless in this life, but we should never make peace with our sin either.

This is what used to be called the mortification of the flesh/ mortification of sin. We do not allow sin to live in us, we derive our sinful thoughts and attitudes of the fuel they need to grow, and we take radical action against it. This is what Jesus was speaking of when he told us to gouge out our eye if it caused us to sin.

5 particular sinful attitudes are mentioned. They move from the external action (sexual immorality = any sexual activity outside of God's command for sex within marriage), to the internal attitudes (evil desires and greed). The addition of the phrase “which is idolatry” points to why these particular sins are focused on – without God we worship ourselves and our desires and this is most

clearly seen in our misuse of our sexual desires, and our desires for “more” (greed).

6. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

It is inconsistent for a Christian to live in the sins mentioned in verse 5 because God’s wrath is coming because of those sins – and we have been saved from his wrath (1:13, 21-23).

Notice the future certainty of the wrath of God. God is angry with sin and sinners and his wrath will be shown. This is not like human anger – a loss of temper – but his settled hostility to all that is evil rooted in his righteous character and justice. This is a deeply unpopular doctrine, but clearly taught here.

7. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.

Again, the contrast between who we were and who we now are is stressed. Verse 5 used to be the consistent pattern of our life (we “walked in those ways”). We may not have been as bad as verse 5 seems, but our heart was idolatrous so the roots of those sins were there.

We do need to bear in mind though that Paul is writing to a church who had recently all become Christians, probably from a gentile (i.e. non Jewish) background. Had he been writing to an ex-Jewish church he may have stressed their outward morality and religiousness rather than their sensuality. Equally these verses are not saying we should pretend to have a wilder background than we have had (e.g. for children brought up in Christian homes). They are basic reminders of what life is like without Christ (whether we experienced it or not), and that gratifying those desires we all have is inconsistent with who we are now in Christ.

8. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips.

5 more sinful actions and attitudes are listed, particularly focusing on how we respond to other people. There is such a thing as “righteous anger” but that is not what Paul is focusing on here – which is probably why he uses the word “rage” as well. This refers to outbursts of temper which often come from self obsessed hearts. Malice is that desire to do harm to others, and slander (the verbal defamation of character) is a practical example of this. Filthy language refers to obscene speech and abusive language.

While these are more active sins than verse 5 it is clear that these can only be dealt with by working on the root problem – our hearts. Our mouth simply speaks an overflow of our heart attitudes. Anger, malice and slander all occur because we have put ourselves first in our hearts, above others.

9. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices

Lying is particularly focused on as a characteristic attitude of our “old self”. The devil, the ruler of this world, is the father of lies, and God is the God of truth, so we must be truthful people.

10. and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Again, the fact that these are not rules for acceptance, but a working out of who we already are in Christ is stressed. Like a set of dirty clothes we have taken off our old sinful self, and we have been clothed with Christ “our new self” which is being renewed, as God makes us like him. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (1:15), and we are becoming like him.

Again, just as in Paul’s prayer in 1:9-10, the connection between knowledge (of God and his will) and obedience is stressed. As we know God and his will, we grow and become what we are in Christ. If we are not “being renewed” we do not truly know God.

11. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

“Here” refers the new self, as in this verse we are reminded that it is not who we are as individuals, but we are “in Christ” as a people, his body, his bride. This is why in particular sins of community are focussed on in this chapter – it makes no sense to lie to a brother or sister who is also united to Christ.

This verse is not making any point about roles within the church (e.g. whether women should preach etc). Paul is telling us that “in Christ” all divisions are destroyed and that we are united. “Christ is all” – this reminds us of 1:15-20. “Christ is in all” – by his Holy Spirit.

Unity is therefore not something to be created, but lived out. We are united to each other because we are united to Christ, and we live that out corporately, we become who we are as the church, in

the same way that we become who we are individually, by killing those attitudes and actions which belong to who we were and by recognising what Christ has done.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

So far in Colossians.....how has Paul called us to live the Christian life? What do we need to remember? (recap particularly 3:1-4)

What are we told to do in verse 5? How does this connect to the preceding verses?

Why do you think those 5 things are mentioned in verse 5? What connects them?

How, practically, do we put them to death?

What reasons are we given for doing this in verses 6 and 7?

What things in particular are mentioned in verses 8 and 9? What connects them? What is the root cause of these sins?

Why can we, and should we change our behaviour in these areas (look at verses 9 and 10)?

Why is there such an emphasis on how we relate to one another in these verses (see verse 11)?

STUDY 9 – COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

SO FAR

Paul has stressed in chapters 1 and 2 that the church are “in Christ”, united to him, and that as we live we should not move away from him, or think that there is more to be found that we don’t have in Christ (which is what the false teachers seem to be saying). In chapter 3 Paul tells us how we grow as Christians – by recognising who we are as new people in Christ, that we should set our hearts and minds on him, and that we should put to death those attitudes and actions which belong to our old nature.

THIS SECTION

Paul moves on to particularly focus on the way we relate to each other in the church. Negatively, he has already told us to rid ourselves of hate and wrong speech (vs 8-9), now he stresses the positive attitudes and actions which should characterise the way we relate to one another. The image Paul uses is that of clothes – we take off our old clothes which belong to our old life, we put on the new clothes which are appropriate for us as the bride of Christ.

NOTES

12. Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Once more, Paul stresses who we are before he gives us commands for how to live. The church is “God’s chosen people”, as Israel were in the Old Testament, with the privilege of being “holy” (set apart for God) and “dearly loved”, so as a result our behaviour should reflect that.

Just as in our personal lives we don’t just deal with our sin by clenching our teeth and fighting against it, but we also positively focus on Christ (vs 1-5), in the church we don’t just not lie to one another (for example), we positively put on the attitudes of Christ. We have “compassion” (merciful care for people in their need), kindness (which is how God treats us), humility (not full of pride), gentle (strength under control – see Ephesians 4:2), and patient, which is necessary for peace and unity.

13. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

This verse shows us how we are to respond with people or situations in the church we may find difficult. We are to “bear with one another”. We do not have to confront another Christian every time we feel hurt by them, there are minor situations where we just need to recognise we are all sinners, and we all have different personality quirks, or realise that sometimes people just have bad days! This is especially a word for us at IPC where there are so many people from so many different backgrounds and cultures, and where offence can be easily taken if we are not ready to “bear with one another”. Seeing the best possible motive behind people’s words and actions is a good application of this principle (rather than jumping to conclusions).

We are to remember that God has forgiven us far more than we ever need to forgive another person. He has forgiven us fully and freely. This verse is not meant to put a limit on our forgiveness (we are not told we are allowed to bear a grudge because someone has not repented), but it is meant to encourage that forgiving attitude in us.

14. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Love binds us together, and is the virtue which is always behind the attitudes mentioned in verses 12 and 13.

15. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

This “peace” is not referring to a subjective feeling of peace in my own heart, but the fact that we as a people are ruled by peace. We are united in Christ, so when we appreciate that we will see that it is a contradiction of who we are to be fighting one another.

Thankfulness comes up time and again in Colossians (remember 1:12, 2:7). The problem with us when we lack peace with one another is that we have forgotten how much Jesus has done for us. The remedy is to thank him.

16. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

The attitudes in verses 12-15 will not come by themselves, we need God to produce them in us, and they come as we read and respond to his word. As a church we must be full of the word of Christ (notice this Christ centred description of the whole bible), and every Christian has a responsibility to teach and admonish their brother and sister. It is not just for apostles (see 1:28 – this is exactly what Paul says he does). We have a responsibility to each other to call each other on to maturity in Christ.

The word also dwells in us as we sing together songs which are full of truths of scripture, and full of the joy and gratitude of knowing we are “in Christ”.

Interestingly there is a parallel passage to this in Ephesians 5, but instead of saying “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”, Paul

says there “ be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18), imply that the two ideas are very similar, if not identical.

17. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

This verse summarises the preceding verses. However we act, we must do it showing the character (“in the name of”) the Lord Jesus, and having him at the centre. The note of thankfulness continues, and Paul reminds us that we praise God the Father only through Jesus Christ.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- Remember to ask some recap questions to remind people of the context, particularly of 3:1-11

How are we as the church described in verse 12? What incentive does this give us to obey these verses?

What are we to put on, as positive characteristics of our life as the church (vs 12-14)? Why do you think these things are mentioned?

Give practical examples of what it means to “bear with one another” (vs 13)?

Why is forgiving others so important (vs 13)?

What should rule in our hearts? Why? (vs 15)

How do we encourage one another on to live in this way? (vs 16)

Is teaching and admonishing just for apostles and preachers? (compare 1:28 with 3:16)

Why do you think the need for thankfulness and gratitude is repeated throughout these verses (vs 15,16,17)?

How does Paul summarise the teaching of these verses in verse 17?

STUDY 10 – COLOSSIANS 3:18-4:1

SO FAR

In chapter 3 Paul has been teaching how we live out our lives “in Christ”. The basic principles are in 3:1-4, and they have been applied to our personal lives, and to our lives as the church.

THIS SECTION

Paul continues to apply the living out of our life in Christ. Now he turns to households, which in the ancient world would have included husbands, wives, children and slaves. The fact that we are “in Christ” has application to all these relationships. Although there are some very challenging things said in these verses, notice that Paul continues to give the motivation for this new behaviour – because we are “in the Lord”.

Notice as well that these verses are about life in the real world. We live out our identity in Christ in the worlds of work and family, we don’t escape from those responsibilities into a holy corner by ourselves.

A note about slaves – Paul is neither condemning or condoning slavery in this passage, merely acknowledging it as a fact of life in Colossae. He is in fact saying something far more radical than “get rid of slavery”, he is saying that as a slave (and even as a master) your defining relationship is your relationship to Christ, and you can live out that relationship while you are a slave. Slavery does not stop you from pleasing Christ!

Although we do not have slaves the verses on slavery can have application to us today. Some people are in financial slavery to others (paying back loans/credit etc) so the verses can apply in that kind of situation. Although the work/employer relationship is different to the slave master relationship there is a case for saying that if these things are true where the slave is not being paid, then how much more should they be true where we are!

NOTES

18 Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.
As a result of the fall (see Genesis 3:16) this is a deeply unpopular verse! But notice that this is addressed to wives about their relationship with their husbands (not women to men generally),

that submission is not a bad thing in itself (it does not imply a difference of value. Jesus Christ submitted to his Father). Notice as well the reason “it is fitting in the Lord”. This is true for all generations because it is how the wife lives out her life in Christ. Paul is not a sexist who is bound to the cultural norms of his day.

19 Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

The way the husband lives out his identity in Christ is to love his wife – not a feeling, but service, even to death (see Ephesians 5). Husbands are not to be harsh – which involves being irritated towards, being aggrieved, shifting the blame. This is what it means to take the lead in the marriage relationship. A husband who does this will make it easy for a wife to submit to him.

20 Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

Children are called to obey their parents, not because they are always perfect, but because this pleases God. This is counter cultural especially today when children are expected to disobey. But it is a great witness to the Lordship of Christ when a child respects and obeys their parents.

21 Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

Fathers are addressed here, and it is a reminder that as the head of the family fathers have particular responsibility for their children (not mothers, the church, or the state). They are to make it easy for children to obey, and to build them up by not embittering them. Fathers must not provoke a rebellious attitude in their children. The worst thing for a child is a professing believer for a father whose life makes it plain he does not believe in the Lord.

22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.

Many in the early church were slaves and it must have been tempting for them to express their new life in Christ by rebelling against their earthly masters. But Paul tells them they must not do that, and that they express their new life in Christ by pleasing their human masters. In fact, knowing Christ gives them a greater incentive to obedience – they will become better slaves, because they serve Christ by serving their boss!

23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,

Knowing the Lord gives greater incentive to work because we serve him whatever we are doing and wherever we are.

24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. 25 Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favouritism.

Paul assures the slaves that their work will not go unnoticed, and that any injustice they receive will not go unpunished.

4:1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know you also have a Master in heaven.

Christian masters equally have a responsibility to provide for their slaves and to give them justice, because they know they serve the Lord.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What have we learnt so far in chapter 3 about how to live the Christian life?

What is the particular responsibility of the Christian wife? Is this just a cultural expectation?

What is the particular responsibility of the Christian husband? Is this just about feelings?

What are children called on to do? Is this because they have perfect parents?

Who are particularly addressed regarding the raising of children? Is this important/surprising? What are they called on to do?

What difference does knowing Christ make to a slave? How will their work change?

What encouragement are they given?

How do masters live out their relationship with Christ as masters (vs 1)?

How does the applications to slaves and masters apply to us today?