

⁶Therefore, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, ⁷by being rooted and built up in him, and strengthened in the faith just as you were taught, while you overflow in faith with thanksgiving.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, which are in accord with human tradition, namely, the basic principles of the world, but not in accord with Christ. ⁹For all the fullness of God's being dwells bodily in Christ. ¹⁰And you have been brought to fullness in him. Christ is the head over every ruler and authority. ¹¹You were also circumcised in him, with a circumcision not done by human hands, in the putting off of the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, ¹²when you were buried with Christ in baptism. And in baptism you were also raised with him through the faith worked by the God who raised Christ from the dead.

¹³Even when you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ by forgiving us all our trespasses. ¹⁴God erased the record of our debt brought against us by his legal demands. This record stood against us, but he took it away by nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵After disarming the rulers and authorities, he made a public display of them by triumphing over them in Christ.

The desire to sacrifice to a deity is innate to human instinct. From the beginning of time, the desire to offer something to a god is nearly universal. Whether money, good deeds, personal discipline, or even blood, human hearts instinctively believe: “If I give to the god, he will give me something in return.” This reveals both a truth and a lie which live in each one of us. The truth is that we know sin creates an issue between us and God, an issue that needs to be resolved. The lie is that we assume we have the power and ability to fix the disparity between us and God.

But today, instead of demanding that we bring a sacrifice good enough for him, God reveals that the only sacrifice that truly matters to him is the one he provides himself. John the Baptist points that sacrifice out in the Gospel reading this morning: “Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Paul echoes that truth here in his letter to the Colossians: Christ alone is sufficient – the spotless and complete Lamb who was slain for you.

Paul begins this section with both encouragement and warning. He first says, “Therefore, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, by being rooted and built up in him, and strengthened in the faith just as you were taught, while you overflow in faith with thanksgiving.” Notice that Paul does not say they are still missing something. There is no line about them having Christ, but that not quite being enough. Instead, he points back to how they received Christ, not by human effort, but by faith. And he uses that wonderful picture of a tree. The Colossians have been rooted in Christ, and as you know, a tree is only as good as its roots.

So, Paul is showing them just how foolish it would be to move off of that solid foundation of Christ.

Then comes his warning: “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, which are in accord with human tradition, namely, the basic principles of the world, but not in accord with Christ.” Those words “captive” and “deceit” really paint a picture for us, don’t they? This is not being swayed from a good entre at the restaurant to a meal that is just ok. This is being taken as a slave, being tricked into a dangerous path.

That was the situation in Colossae. The Christians there were being pressured into other philosophies and traditions, namely a philosophy that merged Christianity, Old Testament Judaism, and general paganism together. This disfigured religion demanded the addition of new rituals and adherence to the Old Testament system of laws. Sure, adherents to this group still claimed to worship Christ, but truly it was subtly replacing Christ with another Savior, erasing the fulfillment of the law Jesus had brought about. This religion sounded so good in their minds. It scratched the itch of self-righteousness. But it was empty to actually save. But that didn’t stop many in the Colossian church from entertaining the idea or even dipping their toe into the water to try it.

The twisted religion the Colossians were exposed to is not exactly what tempts us away from sound doctrine today, but the two are certainly related. The philosophy of our world cries out: “Give so you can get.” This is how we often tilt our relationship with God. And this is how our sinful human hearts are oriented. We make ourselves the actors of salvation instead of God, the stars of the show.

And what does this lead to? It leads to self-help spirituality, where we move from whatever stopped working to whatever is working for right now. It’s a patchwork of religion, a Band-Aid that we put on the same level as God’s lasting peace. I had a friend in high school who was a real go-getter type of guy. He wanted a hobby, but as soon as he got good at one, it lost his appeal and he moved on to the next. The friend was and still is a real renaissance man, talented in everything he touches. But now imagine treating religion how this guy treated hobbies, always jumping from one thing to the next, finding fulfillment until it’s gone and time to try something different. It’s not a bad strategy for hobbies, but it’s a terrible way to live spiritually.

This way of thinking also leads to moral Christianity. You see it all over social media. There’s so much talk about the Christian life and virtue signaling just how holy the person is. They believe a Christian is defined by their works instead of their faith which produces those works. So, when they sin, instead of living in repentance, they either hide their sin or try to outweigh it with more good works, as if that’s how it works. The focus of their faith is on themselves, so it’s no wonder that that kind of faith easily folds when the weight of sin is too much to deny anymore.

Finally, this way of thinking lead to the idea that God helps those who help themselves. This is the height of “Jesus + Works.” It tells you that God will meet you somewhere in the middle, that his grace meets your works to make you enough.

What’s the end result of chasing the philosophies and basic principles of the world? It’s a life that always asks what more there is for us to do. It’s a life that never fully trusts that God loves us. It’s a life that is always looking inward at self instead of outward at Christ.

Christ is the needed Lamb though. Paul brings out that in frail human flesh lies both true God and true man: “For all the fullness of God’s being dwells bodily in Christ.” But why was it necessary for Jesus to be both God and man? He had to be true man to stand in our place under God’s law and die. And he had to be true God to bear the weight of God’s wrath and give us his perfect life.

Paul tells us that Christ doesn’t just participate in God’s plan. He fulfills that plan. He makes it obvious that Jesus is better than the blood sacrifices brought to false gods, which could never save. He’s better than the works-based living that the Colossians were being tricked into believing. He’s even better than the sacrifices of the Old Testament, commanded by God to his people. Because these animals killed on altars for the true God were never meant to save. They were meant to foreshadow the complete sacrifice to come. Hebrews ten says, “The fact is that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins.”

So, God sacrificed his spotless Lamb. Christ died to pay for all our sins and cover all our dispositions. Paul writes, “And you have been brought to fullness in him.” This is the heart of the gospel. Nothing is missing. Nothing is left to be earned. Nothing needs supplementing. Jesus + nothing = completeness. Jesus and Jesus alone is enough. There is no need to add works on top of it. There’s no need for a legal framework that compliments Christ’s death and resurrection. Jesus is sufficient.

But how do you know that this sacrifice is for you? That’s the trick, isn’t it? In the back of our minds, we might wonder if this Lamb is really for us. “We’re saved through faith,” we wonder, “but do we have true faith? Or do we have the right kind of faith or enough of it?” Here we fall back into work-righteousness again, wondering if we have chosen God rightly, if we have oriented our lives in the correct direction. If only God gave us a sign to show us that this sacrifice was made for us.

Paul talks about Old Testament circumcision, which he connects so eloquently with baptism. Circumcision was a sign of God’s covenant with his people. God was marking people as his own, not by choice, but by promise.

Now compare that with New Testament baptism, or as Paul calls it, “the circumcision of Christ.” This is again God marking people as his children, not with human hands, but with God’s action and God’s word. This spiritual circumcision of baptism ties us to Christ in his

death and resurrection. All sin is conquered. New life is claimed. And faith is created and strengthened. All of this we have in Christ, who did away with the legal demands of God's law by fulfilling them all the way to the cross. And how do we know? Because his descent into hell was not as a prisoner or loser, but as the victor over Satan and sin: "After disarming the rulers and authorities, he made a public display of them by triumphing over them in Christ."

So don't look inward, trying to measure your faith and see if it weighs enough. Don't look upward, thinking you can climb your way up to God. Look outward to the Lamb of God. Spotless and clean. Slain for you. Amen.