

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: Introduction (selected verses)

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 5/24/2009

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“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.”

We read those words in the book of Colossians chapter 2, verses 8 to 10. Today we begin an in-depth study of the book of Colossians, and I think those verses are a fitting introduction. In fact, we are going to see that these verses are the main theme, the focal point, of the entire epistle.

“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of this world, and not according to Christ.”

People in the church are being cheated today. They are settling for cheap substitutes for Jesus Christ, cheap substitutes for God's Word, and cheap substitutes for the one true Gospel. Now some cheap substitutes aren't so bad. They can be acceptable. The cheaper store brand of a product may not work quite as well as the name brand, but it's acceptable if it basically does the job. If you buy a compact car instead of a luxury car, the cheaper substitute for the luxury car will still get you to your destination. It may not be as roomy and it may not ride as nicely, but it gets you there.

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But that's not the case when you accept a cheap substitute for the Word of God, or a cheap substitute for Jesus Christ, or a cheap substitute for the one true Gospel. This is something in an entirely different realm. The cheap substitute won't do the job. The cheap substitute won't get you to you the destination. The cheap substitute won't secure eternal life for you. The cheap substitute won't redeem you from your sins.

Many people in the church today are settling for cheap substitutes. They're settling for the word of some man, instead of the Word of God. They're settling for a false Christ who is not the Christ of the Bible. And they're settling for a false gospel, no matter what kind it may be – a false Gospel that is not rooted in the monumental fact that Jesus Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and was buried, and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures.

But you know, settling for cheap substitutes in the church is not something new. Back in the early years of the New Testament church, the Apostle Paul discovered that the people of the church at Colossae were allowing themselves to be cheated.

But people in the church don't need to be cheated. That is what Paul was telling the believers at Colossae. And that is what God's Word tells us today. "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power."

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In other words, accept no substitutes for God's inerrant Word. Accept no substitutes for the Christ of the Bible. Accept no substitutes for the authentic Gospel. Cling to Christ above all, because in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in a body, and if you are truly trusting in Him alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, for your salvation, you are complete in Him. There is no other Word from God. There is no other Savior of men. There is no other way to be reconciled to God than to come through Jesus Christ by faith. Christ above all! That is the great theme of the book of Colossians, and that is the title we have taken for this series – “Christ Above All.”

And as we begin our series of studies today on the book of Colossians today, I want to cover some introductory material about the Apostle Paul, the town of Colossae, and the church at Colossae.

Paul wrote nine letters to various churches that are recorded for us as part of the inspired Word of God, and the book of Colossians is one of the shortest of them. It consists of just four chapters, and 95 verses. The church at Colossae was perhaps the smallest church that Paul wrote to, and Colossae was a comparatively insignificant city in that part of the world.

Colossae was located in a place called the Lycus Valley, which is part of the present-day nation of Turkey. And although Colossae had once been an important city in that part of the world, by the time Paul was writing to the newly-formed Colossian church, their town had been in decline for some time. Other nearby cities

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had grown to be larger than Colossae. In fact, writers of the time mention Colossae as not even a city anymore, but just a village.

And eventually, in the centuries after New Testament times, this small city or village of Colossae would fall into ruin because of earthquakes and other natural events. The site of the city was eventually abandoned, and it actually literally disappeared from the map for many centuries. And it wasn't until the 1830s that archaeologists rediscovered the exact location of the city. And the site of Colossae is still vacant today, a large open field, and it's adjacent to a town called Honaz in modern-day Turkey.

But apparently these factors of small size, and limited numbers of people, and a less than bright prospects for the future in human terms, didn't matter to the Apostle Paul. And clearly those considerations didn't matter to God the Holy Spirit. Paul was concerned enough for the spiritual welfare of the small, fledgling church at Colossae to take the time, moved and inspired by God the Holy Spirit, to write them this very important letter. And God has preserved this letter, to this relatively insignificant church, through the centuries, as part of His inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word.

The book of Colossians may be a small book. But it is a powerful book. All of the Word of God is "alive and powerful," we read in Hebrews chapter 4 and verse 12. It is "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and it is a discerner (or critic) of the thoughts and intents of the heart." And Paul's letter to the Colossians was written

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with just that kind of purpose in mind – to get to the heart issues for the church at Colossae. Paul wanted to give instruction to the people of that church. He wanted to instruct them in sound doctrine, and in righteous living. He wanted to equip them to deal with the issues they were facing as a church, and as individual believers, and as Christian families. And he wanted to reprove and correct them about some wrong thinking and wrong beliefs that had come into their church.

And as the Apostle Paul deals with all these matters, he does so by pointing the Colossian believers to the Lord Jesus Christ. The hallmark of this book is the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is preeminent in this book. The Apostle Paul's number one purpose is to lift up and hold forth the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul puts up in large banners, if you will, the person of Jesus Christ — the deity of Jesus Christ — His work as the creator of the universe — His fulfillment of all of the Old Testament types and symbols pointing to the promised redeemer from sin — His work in coming into this world as the savior of souls — His resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand – His present rule over all things.

The fact that all wisdom is in Christ — the fact that the Scriptures are the very Word of Christ — the fact that Christ, and Christ alone, is the object of saving faith — the fact that it is with Christ that we believers have been raised from the dead — the fact that the church is the body of Christ — the fact that genuine fellowship in the church is fellowship in Christ — the fact that Christ is the Master, the One the Christian serves — the fact that Christ lives in every believer, and “Christ in you,”

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Paul says, is “the hope of glory” — and the fact that Christ Himself is going to come to this earth once again, visibly and bodily, and we are going to appear with Him.

And Paul holds forth the person of Jesus Christ as the One who is, in His very essence, the total contradiction of the very nature of this fallen world, and the world system. He holds up the wisdom of Christ as the total opposite of the way the world thinks. And he holds up the life that we have in Christ, as the total opposite of the condemnation the world is under. And he holds up the life that we are to live in Christ, as something that is to be the total opposite of the way the world lives.

Paul mentions the Lord Jesus Christ in nearly every one of the 95 verses through the entire four chapters of this book. The book of Colossians is one continuous exposition and exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ in all of His manifold offices and aspects, and in His marvelous relationship to each and every child of God.

But Paul does not hold forth all of these wonderful things about the Lord Jesus Christ as just theological facts in the abstract. That is never Paul’s way. And that is never God the Holy Spirit’s way, throughout the pages of the inspired Word. If we ever deal with Scripture as just so much abstract theology, then we have severely and tragically missed the point.

Yes, we need sound theology. We need to understand who God is. We need to understand who Jesus Christ is. We need to understand who God the Holy Spirit is. We need to understand who we are – individuals created in God’s own image. We

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need to understand what has happened to us – that our first parents fell into sin, that the image of God in us was severely marred and distorted, and that as a result the entire human race has fallen under God’s wrath. And we need to understand that Jesus Christ is the creator God made flesh, and that God the Father sent Him into this world to redeem lost sinners through the shedding of His own blood on the cross.

But it does us no good to just understand these things as abstract facts. James chapter 2 verse 19 tells us that the devils understand these things, and they believe them at a certain level. Romans chapter one tells us that every human being understands the basics of theology, including God’s eternal power and Godhead, simply by observing the created universe.

But that kind of knowledge, even that kind of belief, does not save a person. Theology rooted in Scripture is God’s special revelation to us. Theology is of no use at all if it is not practical. Knowing that you are a sinner in need of salvation, and knowing that Christ died to save sinners, is not enough. You must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, put your faith in Him and Him alone, in order to be saved. Theology must become practical. And that is the work of God the Holy Spirit, indwelling the believer, illuminating His Word for us as we hear it preached, and as we read it and study it for ourselves.

And that is exactly the kind of approach we find here in the book of Colossians, and in fact throughout the New Testament. Paul is constantly interweaving his exaltation of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, with practical instruction

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about how the Colossian Christians are to think, what they are to believe, how they are to live, and how they are to deal with the problems they are confronting in life.

I want to give you a very high level outline of the book of Colossians by listing some of the issues that Paul addresses. And keep in mind that at this introductory stage we are just hitting the high points.

In Colossians chapter one, Paul is addressing these issues, these questions – Do you want to be fruitful in every good work? Then grow in your knowledge of Jesus Christ. Do you want to be strengthened spiritually? Then seek to understand more about Jesus. Do you want to understand the depths, the wonders of your salvation? Then learn more about what Christ has done for you.

In chapter two – Do you want to have God’s protection against the deceptions of false teachers? Then learn more of Christ, because in Him and hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Do you want to live before God in a manner that is fitting for a believer? Then seek to be rooted and built up in Christ. Do you want to be on your guard against those who say you need more than Christ’s work in order to be saved? Then understand, Paul says, what it means when I tell you that you are complete in Christ. Do you want to understand the nature of Christian liberty? Then understand who you are in Christ; understand the bondage from which Christ has liberated you.



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In Colossians chapter three – Do you want to understand how to develop Christ-like character? Then let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom. Do you want to have a godly Christian home, and right relationships within the home between husband and wife and between parents and children? Then understand that Christ is the Head of your house.

And at the end of chapter three and on into chapter four – Do you want to understand what your attitude should be as an employee in the workplace? Do you want to understand why it's important for you to do the best job you possibly can for your employer and for your customers? Then understand that your ultimate head and authority in all these relationships, the One you ultimately answer to, is the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you want to understand how and why you should deal fairly with your employees or subordinates in the workplace? Then understand that you have a Master in heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And further on in chapter four – Do you want to know how to pray for me, Paul, and for my fellow laborers in the Gospel? Do you want to know how to pray for pastors, for the leaders of your church, for missionaries? Then pray that God would open the door for us to speak the mystery of Christ that God has now revealed. Do you want to have fellowship with others in the body of Christ, whether it's the people in your local church or others who are far away? Then understand that the focus of true fellowship with other believers is the Lord Jesus Christ.

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And this is just a general summary of the high points of the book of Colossians. As we work our way through this series, the Lord willing we will go into much greater depth.

There is a single phrase, in chapter 3 and verse 16, that really sums up Paul's answer to all these questions, all these issues. He says there, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom." Literally, Paul is saying, let the Word of Christ be at home in you. Let God's Word live within you. Let God's Word be at home in you. Let the Word of Christ inhabit you. Let your relationship with the Word of God be that kind of intimate, continual, ongoing relationship that you would desire to have with the person who is closest to you in your own home.

And, Paul says, let the Word of Christ dwell in you "richly". In great abundance. Feast upon it. Take in everything that God's Word has for you. Don't put yourself on a spiritual starvation diet. Don't starve to death in a house full of the best food available. Feast upon the Bread of Life. And, Paul says, let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly "in all wisdom." Every area of life. Every area of knowledge. Paul tells the Colossians in chapter 1 and verse 9, I "do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power."

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And dear friend, that is my prayer for you as we begin this series on the book of Colossians. I'm excited about the prospect of studying this powerful book with you. And on our next program we'll begin at chapter one and verse one, as we begin to dig into the gold mine of the riches of this epistle.