

Gospel GPS
Colossians 2:6-7
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This morning as we turn to God's word, we do so by beginning a new series for the fall. It's a ten-week series on gospel GPS, the pathway for spiritual formation. It is the expressed desire of Paul to make known that the purpose of Christ and His kingdom is that the people of God might not only know Christ but that we might grow in our maturity, that we might grow to completion and fulfillment, wholeness in what it means to know Jesus.

This was a continued theme that we see with Paul and also the other writers of the New Testament, and over these ten weeks, what we're going to do is to look at deeper elements of what it means to be spiritually formed in Jesus. And a part of that is understanding what spiritual maturity is and also understanding that spiritual maturity isn't just a theology lesson. It's not just a head trip. It's also understanding how our whole bodies, souls, and spirits are made whole and matured in Jesus Christ. So it is spiritual maturity, but spiritual maturity with greater emotional health. It is very possible to seek spiritual growth but ignore our emotional spirituality, our emotional health. So our desire is to see that we are called to be a whole person before our God.

But this is not merely as individuals. This is not merely meant to be ten weeks where you can learn to apply this just to yourself but also the church collectively because this was the desire that Paul had when he wrote to the church. It wasn't just you singular, while it certainly applies to us individually, but what does it mean for the church as a whole, as a community? Because not only can individuals be taken off track in what it means to grow spiritually. The church institutionally can also go off track. Not only can an individual grow very spiritually unhealthy emotionally, but so can a whole church. So it's ways in which we're trying to ask the question, what does it mean to be more deeply formed as followers of Jesus spiritually, emotionally, but also relationally?

We turn this morning to the second chapter of Colossians as it forms a key turning point in the letter. Before I read it, I want you to understand where it is in the letter to Colossians. What is typical for Paul, and certainly here in Colossians is a beautiful example, is he begins the letter with a general hello and a general greeting, and then he paints the picture of who we are, those who believe in Christ Jesus. He paints the picture of who you are because of what He is and what He has done, His person and His work. And so we have embedded within the first chapter of Colossians one of the greatest hymns ever written about who Jesus is.

Then Paul comes to chapter 2. He then says with all of his might, with all of his strength, with every fiber in his body, his desire is to make known the work of Christ so that the church of Jesus Christ might reach complete maturity, wholeness in who Jesus is. In some sense, it forms an hourglass. He starts with this great hymn to Christ. He then comes to these two verses as a turning point. Then from there, he begins to apply what it looks like in the rest of the church and in the Christian life itself. He's giving to us the gospel GPS, how the gospel resets our direction. And it's not something that we just check once in a while. It becomes the way in which we seek to live. We can never depart from it. We never grow out of it. We never mature out of our need to continually come back to Christ and what it means to walk in Him.

Let's begin today with the gospel GPS, the pathway for spiritual formation in Colossians 2:6-7.

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me again briefly?

Father, we now ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit which you have poured out on your church that you would give us eyes to see and hearts to receive and for our lives to be transformed in what it means to follow Jesus, not only individually but also corporately. Help us, O Lord, that we might receive and attain greater wholeness and maturity in Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

A few years ago, in the mid-2000s, Kate and I and our daughter Caroline went to see our friends in central Connecticut. Maybe I've told this story before, but it's so perfect. It needs to be said again. So here we are. We're in central Connecticut, beautiful place. And at the time, I was still very much involved in racing my bicycle in whatever way I could and whatever time I could, and it was a great opportunity. Hey, there's going to be a mountain bike race that very weekend that we're going to be in central Connecticut. So I put my mountain bike on the top of the car, and we went. We told our friends, hey, we're coming to spend the weekend with you. We're looking forward to it. I'm going to be racing my bike on Saturday morning, hope you don't mind. Yeah, no problem. Okay. Great. So we go, and we're up there.

Now, I didn't have one of those GPS devices that some people had on their dashboards. I still was using MapQuest or whatever it was during that time, and I would map it out online and print it out, and I had my little folder ready to go. Saturday morning, wake up first thing, put the bike on the car, boom, let's go. So I'm driving off.

It came to this point where you're sort of on the outskirts of the suburbs where we were, and there was this crucial moment where I needed to make the right turn so I didn't miss the start time, which has happened before, so I was like, let me pull over to the side. I pulled over to the side, and I'm rechecking MapQuest. And as I did, another man comes along, and his bike's on top of his car. He sees my bike, he rolls down the window and says, hey, are you headed to such and such bike race? Yes, I am. Oh, I am too. Hey, do you know where you're going? And he's like, I think I know where we are, and I've got this GPS. And I was like yeah, all I've got is MapQuest. Yeah, great. And he's like, you can just follow me. Great.

So I pull in behind him, and we go to the end of the street. At a stop sign, he makes a right turn. I make a right turn. We go down to the next block. He makes a right turn. I make a right turn. We go to the stop light, and he makes a right turn. I make a right turn. And I think you know where this is going. We go to the next block and make a right turn. Make a right turn. And he stops again. Now I pull up alongside him going, hey man, I don't think your GPS is taking us where it needs to go. So I'm going to stick with my MapQuest. You're free to follow me if you like, but we got to go.

And so fortunately, we made it on time. Great. But it's a great lesson that regardless of what kind of GPS you might be using and regardless of whether you actually typed in the right coordinates of where you need to go, it doesn't always mean you're going to end up where you're supposed to be. It requires observation. And if you're a Waze person, you'll know that as you punch in your coordinates and where you need to go, sometimes Waze needs a few minutes to catch up with exactly where you are. And I have more than once left a parking lot or neighborhood thinking I'm going in the right direction when I haven't been looking consistently at Waze. It's reoriented, but I haven't. So it's not a full proof way of finding where you need to be.

The gospel is intended to be our GPS. But if we forget that our finishing coordinates are full maturity in who Jesus is and that it requires constant rechecking, then we will have missed out on what it means to be more spiritually and deeply formed in maturity in Christ. It matters, too, that we understand it's not just about where we're going, but it's also about where we are and how we got here. All of it plays a role. But if we think also that all that Jesus was doing was coming so that we might have life and forgiveness but forget there is an actual goal in mind, we are robbing the gospel of its riches and missing out on what Jesus has intended for us. He intends for us full maturity, fullness, wholeness in what it means to know Jesus.

So as we look at this passage this morning, Paul again takes us and reveals to us the truth that the gospel is moving us toward. It's moving us toward maturity. It's moving us toward deeper formation in who Jesus is and greater spiritual and emotional health. And so this morning, we're going to look at three things from these two verses: receive, walk, and abound. Let's look at these together.

Paul says here, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord." So he's telling them that you have already received. You've already given testimony. But even though he acknowledges their reception and having received the truth of who Jesus is, that didn't stop him from reminding them of what exactly they have received. This is important because Paul wants them to know, and we need to be reminded, that receiving Christ Jesus is committing to formation and not merely conversion.

What he says earlier in chapter 2 is, "For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you." Now, that word rendered in English seems like, well, I get it. You're striving. But actually, in the Greek it is every cent of who he is, and his calling is bent on this one desire. He has labored. He has struggled. He has given of himself that they might know that all who have seen him and who haven't yet seen him face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged and be knit together in love to reach all the riches of full assurance and knowledge of the mystery of who God is in Christ. In Christ, we have all the fullness of wisdom and knowledge.

"I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments, for though I am absent from you in the body, yet I am with you in spirit rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Jesus." He understood that there are those who would lead with plausible arguments, that somehow Jesus and what salvation is in Christ may be one thing and not another. And he always brings them back that Jesus is one thing. He is not merely our redeemer that you receive forgiveness, but rather, He is the one through whom and by whom we live this life. Therefore, as a result, we are to understand that we are called in God and Christ to see that the end goal is greater maturity.

In other words, if you will, to receive Jesus as king and redeemer and not understand that He also brings with Him a kingdom way of living is to make God in our own image and to miss out on what is actually intended in Christ. If, on the other hand, your desire is to have a kingdom where we might live out a certain ethic or things to do but forget or not acknowledge or want Jesus as king, we again have made God in our own image. To receive Christ is to receive Him both as king and His kingdom as one. He is redeemer who is the Lord who also intends for us to live in certain ways individually and corporately. If we don't, what we end up with is, as Dr. David Wells, professor and author and theologian, says, "We end up with a weightless God meaning we end up with a domesticated Christ."

Here's the point. To receive Christ shakes us to our core. If we begin to go deeper in what it means to know that in Jesus is all the wisdom and all the knowledge of who God is means that it will thunder to the very roots of our life and reorient how we speak, how we act, how we understand our feelings, how we understand our relationships, every part of our life. Not one shred of our lives is left outside the light of His grace and also His power.

Let me say it another way. Not a shred of our lives falls outside the light of His holiness. You see, we can't have a God of grace without a God of holiness. We can't have a God of holiness without a God of grace. It's both together. And we begin to domesticate God if we think He's anything less than the holy, righteous, pure, and awesome God of weight and power whose searing light and eyes and mind knows everything about us, every motive, ever thought whether spoken or unspoken, every act done in public or in private. He knows us. And it is the light of His searing holiness that understands that at the very core of who we are, we are profoundly simple and broken. But yet that same holy God gives us the weight and power of His grace to make us new. To receive Him is to be deeply formed by both His kingship and His kingdom, His holiness, and His grace.

So Paul says, "As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him." Not just receive but walk. And I think what he's talking about here is to be deeply rooted versus what author and pastor Rich Villodas calls "shallow formation." It is this deeply rooted versus shallow formation.

For when Paul says here, "So walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith," what he's saying to the church is that to walk in Him is to remember that in our decisions, in our lives, what's going on inside of us or what's not going on inside of us is all bound to the lordship of Christ, all of it. We are bound to Him. So to walk in Him is a recognition that to call Him as Lord is to understand that all that we do is all His. There is no such thing as secular and sacred. It's all His, and we walk in Him. We're bound to Him. But He is our example. Thanks be to God. He has gone before us and obeyed in every way.

As the early church fathers and as the scriptures teach us, Jesus did not bypass being a child. He didn't bypass being a teenager. He didn't bypass being an adult. He walked in our place in every way and was fully obedient. And so now, we follow Him in our walk bound to Him as Lord, and we follow Him as an example. But we also remember, thanks be to God, that every step of that walk is under the same Lord who has obeyed in our place. But we're still called to walk. We're still invited to do the work.

And so as we go through this series, you're going to hear several questions that are going to be asked, and we are going to repeat them over and over again to the point that over the next ten weeks, you're probably going to get mad at us for saying it so much. Here are some questions I want you to write down and think about. Number one, if you are a professing Christian, where are you? How are you doing? Number two, do you know where you're going? Do you know that Christ in His grace and the power of His Spirit means to grow you in maturity and what that looks like for you? Thirdly, where have you been that has helped get you to where you are? Because where we're going and where we are is deeply shaped by where we've been. And the final question in this subset is who are you going with?

Where are you? Where are you going? Where have you been? And who are you traveling with? To walk, to be rooted, to be built up in Him involves all of these important questions, and we will unpack them in the weeks to come.

But more than that, it's going to actually mean that to walk in Him, we're going to have to do some pretty difficult work. It is work that cannot be forgotten, work that is not merely individual but corporate in nature. And it is what pastor Bobby Flayhart calls the "gospel waltz" explained this way.

Number one, to walk in Him means to ask the question what sin do I need to repent of? And to go even deeper, what sins underneath those sins do I need to really uncover and confess? Could it be pride? Could it be self-righteousness? Could it be selfishness? What sin do I need to confess and repent of?

But that leads right to this second step in this gospel waltz, and that is this. How am I forgiven in Christ? Which means how am I resting? How do I find rest in the righteousness of this Lord, the one with whom I walk? Because on the one hand, you can be all about beating yourself up but forget to rest in the righteousness of Christ. We must ask both. Where do I need to confess? Where do I need to rest?

And then thirdly, how am I called to obey? Asked another way, how am I called to move toward the Lord but also move towards others? So what do I need to confess? Where do I need to rest? How do I need to move forward?

This is what the scriptures give us, for to walk in Him and to be rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, we understand that it involves deep rooted formation which means we are to do the hard and difficult work and find out what's going on inside of us and inside of me. It is both and. And I must tell you that in this hard work, we must also be aware of our tendency to want to bypass the hard work.

Now, what works when it comes to getting where you need to go in the GPS and the Waze world of avoiding traffic is not healthy in the spiritual life. What do I mean? If you use Waze, you'll know the great thing about Waze is if something's happening up in front of you, people will alert it, and then Waze will reroute you around whatever the accident is or traffic, whatever the case may be. Now, that's great when it comes to driving a car, but it is completely unhealthy in the spiritual life if what we're trying to do is either use spiritual practices. As my friend and practitioner Dr. Chuck DeGroat says, "Spiritual bypassing

happens when we use spiritual means or spiritual practices to bypass heart emotions. The best practices help us move through the wilderness and the wildness of pain and journey to greater spiritual maturity." We can actually use Bible study and prayer to avoid actually looking deeper to ask where do I need to confess? Who do I need to go to in order to seek reconciliation? Because it's hard, and we want to bypass it. We don't want to have those hard conversations. We must be willing to lay ourselves bare before the Lord and ask, Lord, how do I need to grow even if that means I have to look at difficult things?

Finally, it's not just to receive and walk. It is also to abound. You see, when what we have received, that is Christ, is by His Spirit integrated with how we actually walk, what begins to break forth is a greater spiritual health, and we begin to abound in the fruitfulness of what it means to be in a relationship with Jesus. What we understand to be the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, the question is how can this be more integrated in receiving and walking so that we might abound more fully in what it means to know Christ? And as we grow in this integration of receiving and walking, Paul says here that as we do so, we will abound in thanksgiving. We'll be thankful because we'll begin to see not just what other people can see is changing, but we know what's changing also are the parts that others can't see.

We live in an age where we're very selective about what we want people to see. And we do it all over social media. We want people to see what we think, how we look, how we're doing. But underneath is not always a well-ordered well-lived life. Oftentimes, when we're honest, there's a lot of disorder. And much of the time, what we want the world to see is what we wish and hope we actually are. To abound means a wholeness emotionally, relationally, and spiritually is beginning to bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit of which Paul intends for us to grab hold. It is the abounding life.

But here's the reality. Today, we can choose our church based on what parts we like and what parts we don't like. Today, you can choose whatever church you want. If you're really into right theology, you can find that church. Maybe what you want is the right action, a church that focuses on what we need to do and be on mission. Or you can go find a church where it's focused on how you feel, emotion. The church of Jesus Christ in the United States as, a lot of the time, fallen prey to individual consumerism merely seeing congregants as customers so that they provide what scratches your itch. And you go to the church that scratches your back. I'm not suggesting that's why you're here. But the realities are that we can choose churches based on that.

But what the gospel reminds us of is that that church is intended to be a place where we understand it's not just about theology or action or experience, but it's about an integrated whole of receiving and walking in Christ. In other words, if we have a domesticated God, we end up becoming domesticated followers, and our fruit of our lives, of love, joy, and peace, the aroma of the gospel at work isn't present. But abounding in fruitfulness is also really messy work because sometimes you want to produce a fragrant orange, but sometimes you're just a putrid banana, right? Sometimes what you intend to be an act of love and service actually ends up being your desire to just get more attention. What you intend to be the fruit of encouragement actually just ends up being a leverage tool so that you can gain that person's support.

Even when we are trying to do our best, all of our good works are still themselves not untainted by the reality and presence of sin. So it's messy work, but it's still the work of the Holy Spirit bringing good fruit even when we mess up. Even when we do mess up, and we confess, and we're vulnerable to others asking for forgiveness, seeking wholeness, even that can be the instrument in Christ's hand to bring about glory to His name and deeper maturity in ourselves.

I end with this. Fellow colleague and pastor in the PCA in Denver, Colorado, Brandon Washington writes recently that he and his family live in a community not dissimilar to Columbia. They have a community that has an HOA and agreement on what things can be done. If you need a fence, you need approval. And you get the idea.

But one of the things that happens every so often is that an arborist cleans up the trees. And so the day arrived when the arborist was coming around to their house to deal with all the trees that belong to the city, those that are right up near the streets' edge. And he noticed that as the arborist was moving into his neighborhood, they completely bypassed the tree that he felt needed the most work. And so he goes out to the arborist and says the following. "Just out of curiosity, I need to ask you a question. Me and my family, we've lived here for seven years, and that tree has never borne one pear. But it's a pear tree. But you didn't touch it. It's clearly not doing what it's supposed to do." And the arborist responds, "That's because it's a domesticated pear tree." Brandon says, "Wait, what?" To which the arborist responds,

"Some fruit trees are both pleasing to the eye and easy to maintain and would be ideal decorative species if not for the messy and inconvenient fruit that regularly falls to the ground and clutters your neat suburban lawn and if neglected will rot right there where it lays. Thus, domesticated fruit trees are trees that have had their fruit bearing genes bread out of their DNA so that they could be visually pleasing and conveniently maintained with little effort."

Brandon summarized, "Domesticated suburbanites wanted a fruit tree without the fruit. It is like a Christian who wants a king without his kingdom and who has literally made the gospel in their own image."

When receiving Christ and walking in Christ is integrated, it will bring about the hard and even messy work of having the fruit abound in our lives. But it is work we are called to nonetheless because spiritual maturity and spiritual formation is the goal of the gospel, that we would be made like Him and for Him and to Him. As we come to the table this morning, be reminded that it is the Lord our redeemer who invites us, who has set this table to remind us we can find renewal and newness and strength not because of anything in the elements themselves but because of the Holy Spirit that had been poured out in His church. And we turn to Him, and we say, Holy Spirit, come and feed us. Deeply form Christ in us that He hears our prayers and He feeds us. The Lord means to make us more and more in His image for the sake of His glory, and the renown of His name, and the extension of His kingdom. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we now ask as we begin this journey of understanding what spiritual maturity looks like, what does it mean for us to be emotionally healthy as those who are followers of Jesus Christ? Father, I pray for your church that you would feed her, that you would mature her, and that the church of Jesus Christ would bear the fruit of the Spirit because, O Lord, by your Spirit we have received Jesus. We are seeking to walk in Him by your strength. And you are bringing about fruit for the glory of your name. Do this, we ask. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.