

couple of months, we'll immerse ourselves in this book. We're going to do an overview this morning and then pick it up after Labor Day. Let's take a moment to look at it.

The book has only four chapters, ninety-five verses; it's not even four pages in my Bible. And yet, it may be the greatest writing on how spiritual formation works in the life of a believer or, what Paul calls, "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (**Colossians 1:27**).

Paul writes this letter to a young church in Colossae, a small town in Asia Minor. You can get a sense of where the city of Colossae was on the map. (Cf. map). It is in Asia Minor (our modern-day Turkey) on a tributary of a river called Meander—it's famous for its curves. Colossae was the least important city Paul wrote to. In fact, Paul never even went to Colossae.

Colossae was right next door to another city, called **Laodicea**. The two cities and churches seem to be intimately **connected**. Paul mentions the Laodiceans four times in this book:

2:1 – "*I want you to know how much I'm struggling for you and for those in Laodicea...*"

4:13 – "*I vouch for him [Epaphras] that he is working hard for you and those at Laodicea and Hierapolis.*"

4:15-16 – "*Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea. When this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of Laodiceans.*"

In **Revelation 3:15-16**, John writes to the church at Laodicea: "*I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. Because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth.*"

There are some indications the Colossians may have had the lukewarm syndrome as well. (Paul asks that the same letter be read by the Laodicean church). They're not hostile to God but they're not fully devoted either.

In **4:17**, Paul gives some personal instructions: "*Say to Archippus, 'See to it that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.'*" Archippus was likely a leader, perhaps a teacher, who apparently wasn't following through on his responsibilities. And, as Paul knows, as the leadership goes, so goes the church.

Look at the contrast to the apostle Paul. He writes in **1:18, 29** – "*It is Christ whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me, for I want you to know how*

much I'm struggling for you and for those in Laodicea, for all those I've not yet seen face to face."

Paul calls the church, the church in Colossae and the church in Cutlerville, to toil with all the *energy* God gives so everyone may be presented mature in Christ. Paul is suggesting there is only one way to live – as a disciple of Christ; and there is only one way to “do church” – all out – “*toiling and struggling with all the energy Christ powerfully inspires in us.*”

Paul writes this epistle (letter) from prison about 61 A.D. It is one of four letters he wrote while imprisoned in Rome (along with Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon). Paul isn't there for a parking ticket. He's there because he followed Jesus. He is counting the days until his head will be severed outside the walls of Rome. But Paul belongs to his faithful Savior Jesus Christ in both life and death.

Colossians is a book about discipleship. I was thinking about adding the word “extreme” to discipleship – “extreme discipleship.” Not “extreme” in the sense of wild, crazy or foolish danger, but in the sense of a zealous, intense, significant, a pulling-out-all-the-stops, commitment to following Jesus.

So I googled “extreme games” hoping for some illustrations. I was disappointed that most of the responses I got were for “extreme games online.” Not at all what I had in mind. I was thinking mountain climbing, deep sea diving, cliff diving, sky diving (lots of diving) – activities you can't approach casually. Jump off a cliff or out of an airplane and you are fully committed. Discipleship is “extreme” – it requires being “all in”, fully devoted, deeply committed, and risking everything.

I tried one of those climbing walls some years ago (okay, decades ago). The students were doing it and so, as a leader, you kind of have to do it too. So I did. Let me describe it for you. There was this wall about 1,500 feet straight up with cheap little plastic do-hickeys to grab with your hands and put your feet on. They attached you to a safety harness made of dental floss. (I hate heights.) The guide tried to assure me the equipment would hold five elephants and me. (I eventually got to the top. The line held. I would never have known that if I hadn't tried.)

Extreme discipleship is **first century discipleship. First century discipleship is extreme discipleship. Being fully devoted to Jesus in Paul's day was risky, even life-threatening, but the early disciples understood you can't be lukewarm about Jesus.**

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

“Go, sell everything you have. Give your money to the poor and come follow me.” (Mark 10:21)

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself, can’t be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)

That’s extreme. Colossians reminds us that the call to follow Jesus is the call to extreme, **fully devoted discipleship**. It is the only kind Jesus accepts.

In the remaining moments this morning, I want to make a couple of observations and then note the major themes in this letter. It is my prayer the Holy Spirit will use Colossians and our study to continue to transform our lives so we can all become *“mature in Christ.”*

TWO THOUGHTS

First: Things taught from a **prison cell ought to be considered carefully.** Colossians 4:18 reads, *“I Paul, write this with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.”*

Sometimes people try to convince themselves that if life were good (better) – if they had more money, a newer house, a better job and a prettier wife or a nicer husband, they would be a more committed follower of Jesus. Maybe that has been true for some people.

But most of us learn the hard way – through **suffering**, pain, disappointment, **failure**, and loss. Much of the New Testament and much of the theology we lean on has been written on sinking ships, horseback (or camelback), in secluded caves and back rooms, and in prison cells. That is why it is authentic, and relevant and deep.

Prison cells come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes: maybe it is a long illness, a divorce, a death in the family, a child who has turned away, a fire or a flood, or a struggling business.

God tends to grow roses among thorns, bring flowers into prison cells. Henri Nouwen writes about being *“wounded healers.”* Thomas Chalmers said, *“We are to be poured out wine and broken bread for everyone.”* In the midst of our prisons, we become **authentic**, relevant, and **deep**.

We need to remember as we read this book, that Paul is writing while in prison.

Second, Colossians is a **big message from a **Big God**. Colossae, along with Laodicea and Hierapolis, had been a city of significant importance.** But by the time Paul writes to them, it was a small **remnant** of its glorious past. Few people went to Colossae. Paul never did.

But sometimes God sends big messages to little places. Like one Christmas some years ago, God entered time and space. He didn't show up in Rome or even Jerusalem; he didn't come with trumpets blaring or a military entourage. He showed up in a small shepherds' village with a manger for his bassinet. God loves to do big things in **small places**.

Jesus called twelve to follow him through Galilee and together they changed the world. God does powerful and precious things with a few people in small places. He can do something amazing in your life; he can use Covenant Church to change the world.

As we go through this book, we'll see God use this little book and that little town to bring the world an amazing message. Don't forget as we read this book together.

FOUR THEMES

The single overriding theme of Colossians is the “Lordship of Jesus Christ.”

1:3a – *“We always thank God, the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ...”*

1:10 – *“May you live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way...”*

1:15 – *“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation...”*

1:18 – *“He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn among the dead, so that in everything he might have supremacy.”*

Colossians presents a powerful picture (Christology) of the **exalted** nature of Jesus **Christ!** There was a heresy (a false teaching) in the church in Colossae called “**Gnosticism**.” Gnostics believed there was a massive distinction between the “**good**” spiritual world and the “**evil**” material world. They reasoned, if Jesus came to earth and took on “evil” flesh, he must have been evil and couldn't really be God. So, Paul makes it clear Jesus is Lord, fully God, the creator of the universe, the source of all holiness, justice, and power, and the one that holds life and death in his hands. He is the only begotten Son of God.

True Christianity is measured by our **Christology**: i.e., how we see **Jesus**. If you don't acknowledge Jesus as King, Lord, God manifest in the flesh, then you don't know Jesus and you are not a Christian.

The story is told of a king, feeling alienated from his people, who decided to dress like a peasant and mingle. He went to a tavern, ordered an ale. There was a knight there who asked the bartender: “Who is that man?” The bartender said, “Looks like just a peasant to me.” The Knight said, “He may look like a peasant, but he speaks like a King.”

If we are Christians, we have met the King. If you've met a king, you know it! When you meet the one in control of the universe, the church, and (your) life, you feel it and you sense it viscerally. He is Lord. He is the king of kings. He is the one!

To follow this exalted Christ is an adventure in trust and faith that will change one's life. As we exalt Christ together, the rest of our lives—our problems, worries, challenges, etc.—begin to look smaller. When we see and acknowledge Christ for who he really is, the rest of our world, the rest of our life, the rest of our problems—begin to be seen the way that God sees them. Jesus is Lord!

The second major theme to note is the “Universality of Truth.”

Paul writes, “...the faith and hope that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the Gospel that has come to you” (1:5-6a).

There is another heresy Paul addresses in Colossians, is **syncretism**. That heresy says, “It really doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe it sincerely.” This heresy says there are lots of ways to God (and, if you don't find one you like, you can make up your own). So, you can have your Truth and I'll have my Truth. You can believe what you want; and I'll believe what I want.

If that is what you believe, you will not like Colossians, because if Truth isn't true for everyone, then it isn't Truth. Two plus two can't be three, or four, or five all at the same time! We testify that Scripture is the **infallible** Word of God; that is, that it is Truth. And Truth, by nature, is universal; it is true for everyone.

Sadly, our world today loves to **fudge** on Truth. We find truth lacking today in halls of our nation's capital, in university classrooms, on the editorial pages, and even in churches. H. Richard Niebuhr defined modern day “Christianity” as “*a God without wrath who brought man with sin into a kingdom without judgment for the ministrations (help) of Christ without a cross.*”

Many are frustrated by the fact that (true) Christianity can't be revised to meet our current perspectives and preferences. (True) Christianity has a Truth that is chiseled in concrete. We can be nice about it, but we can't deny it. Once you've seen the truth, you can't unsee it. There is absolute Truth and our only response is to acknowledge it or ignore it. We can't change absolute Truth.

Third, there is the theme of the “Practicality of Faith.”

This is a very practical book: *“The Gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace” (1:6).*

Like Paul has in most of his letters, the first half of this Epistle (ch.1-2) is more **theological**, doctrinal, metaphysical and the last two chapters (3-4) are how to apply the doctrinal teaching in a **practical** way.

Paul will talk about *“sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed” (3:5)*. He’ll talk about *“anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language” (3:8)*. He’ll talk about *“compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” (3:12)*. He’ll talk about forgiving and being forgiven **(3:13)**. He’ll talk about *“psalms and hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in our hearts” (3:16)*. He’ll talk to wives, husbands, and children. He’ll invite us to pray and remind us how to converse with others **(4:2-6)**.

In last week’s message on the parables of the home builders, **(Matthew 7:24-27)**, we noted that Jesus said, *“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man...”* Sadly, there is often a disconnect between our hearing and our doing.

My preaching professor said simply, *“Tell them what it **means**; tell them how it **works**; and send them out to **do it**.”* Sadly, we have lots of theological knowledge in our heads that never seems to make it down to our heart and hands, and feet. Real Christianity is very practical; it is designed to get us through the day, every day, until we go home.

Fourth, there is the theme of the “Necessity of Love.”

Paul writes, *“...and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.”*

As the denominational prayer mobilizer, I had numerous opportunities to teach on prayer for Home Missions. In searching the Scriptures, I was surprised to find so little admonishment for believers to pray for the lost. We’re supposed to have a burden for the unsaved and the harvest, but there is far more encouragement to pray for each other. I wonder why?

And then it started to make sense. People don’t usually come to Jesus because of great preaching or a great evangelism presentation. Unbelievers are not initially impressed with our theology. People come to Jesus because they have seen our love for one another. Our loving one another in a loveless world is like a fire on a cold night – it draws people to it.

And we need to pray about that kind of love among us, because it doesn’t seem to come **naturally**. We bring our critical, suspicious spirits with us wherever we go – even to church. We find it easier to walk away than to **forgive**, turn the other cheek, and walk the **extra mile**. We gossip, hold

grudges, complain, and write people off. The world needs to know who we **are** and who we **belong to** because of our love for one another.

Someone told me they had found the secret to a happy marriage: Two nights a week we go out and have a wonderful dinner, soft lights, candles, calming music. She goes on Tuesday; I go on Thursday.

The world says, “stay apart” and you’ll get along better. Jesus says, “*Come together and you’ll draw the world to me.*” Some of us (including me) can be hard to love; but Jesus told us to do it anyway because it is what God did for us: “*For God so loved this world, he gave his one and only Son...*”

In Colossians, Paul will remind us how important love is in Christ’s Church and in God’s Kingdom.

ONE THESIS

One of the clearest pictures of spiritual life in the New Testament is Colossians 3:17 - “*And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*” That is discipleship in a **nutshell**. The text is worth memorizing.

Let me just take a moment to explain, we’ll come back to it again later.

“*Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus...*” In biblical times, a name was a way of expressing the essential character of that which was named. So, when Paul says, “*I want you to do things in the name of Jesus,*” he means “*do it in a way that reflects the **character** and essence of **Jesus**.*” Keep your personality, genes, uniqueness, but take on the character of Jesus.

“*And whatever you do . . .*” Now, that’s comprehensive. How much of your life falls under “**whatever**” you do? It’s the whole thing; all of it! Paul clarifies it in case we’re not sure: “*...whatever you do in word or deed...*”

If you’re still looking for loopholes, Paul said, “*Do everything in name of the Lord Jesus.*” Paul is serious about this. When you and I get **serious**, specific, and concrete, then we begin to understand the scope and **extreme nature** of discipleship.

What does it mean for us to do **everything** in Jesus’ name? **Over the next couple of months, we’ll talk about that together:**

1. How should we come to, engage in, and leave after worship...in Jesus’ name?
2. How should we get up in the morning and go to bed at night...in Jesus’ name?
3. What does it mean to go to work in Jesus’ name? To parent in Jesus’ name? To pray in Jesus’ name? To play in Jesus’ name? To spend money in Jesus’ name? To shop in Jesus’ name? To do recreation in Jesus’ name?

4. What does it mean to wash a car, take out the trash, mow the lawn...in Jesus' name?
5. What does it mean to be a **disciple** of Jesus? Doing all these things in Jesus' name!

LET'S STAND FOR CLOSING PRAYER.

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