

Forgiveness

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in a six-week series

March 29, 2020

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Community:

Colossians 2:9–10 (NRSV)

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.

Cross:

Colossians 2:11–12 (NRSV)

¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹² when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

New Creation:

Colossians 2:13–14 (NRSV)

¹³ And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

God calls us to love in action and faith. How are we doing?

If you look at the Scripture passages for this week, you will see that all three form a single passage within which the images of community, cross, and new creation are interwoven. We begin with the “you” in verse 8, which we ought to read as “y’all,” for Paul is speaking to the community. It is we, as a body, as the body of Christ, that have “come to fullness in him [Christ]” (v. 10). If, when reading Paul, you are ever unsure whether a second person pronoun is singular (you) or plural (y’all), assume it is plural and you will almost certainly be right. Paul speaks to the community of believers throughout his letters. After all, he is their pastor.

Verse 12, takes us to the cross, where we find that we have not only been buried with Christ but also raised with him, which takes us barreling into the new creation and our proclamation that the kingdom of God was inaugurated in and by Jesus . . . and nothing can ever be the same. Jesus has forgiven our sins, nailing to the cross the list of charges against us. We have been made alive with Jesus. What powerful images. As Paul writes in 2 Cor. 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ -- New Creation!! -- the old has gone and the new has come.” Nothing has been the same since that Friday in Jerusalem nearly two millennia ago.

Fullness?

Survey after survey reveals that Americans, Christian and non-Christian alike are becoming increasingly ignorant of the most basic teachings of the Christian faith. We’ve talked for years here at St. Andrew about the growth of a competing “christianity” – similar in name and form to the real thing, but still a fraud. Further, there has been an unending stream of competing gospels fed to us, each telling its own story of how we can be rescued, what we must do to save the planet or save ourselves, build a world of peace and harmony, and so on.

Since humans tend to believe that the answer lies within themselves, Paul faced much the same problem in his day. People put their trust in many complicated schemes by

which they might get right with the gods and indulged in much deep thinking about the whole thing. So, Paul wrote the Christians in Colossae and urged them to “see to it that nobody enslaves you with philosophy and foolish deception, which conform to human traditions and the way the world thinks and acts rather than Christ” (Col. 2:8). Paul had worked mightily against a competing gospel in Galatia – embrace the Law of Moses if you want to be a true follower of Jesus, the opponents said . . . Paul didn’t even try to be nice to the pushers of that fraud. Similarly, in Colossae there are some who wanted to add-on this and that to the simple gospel of Christ. Paul would have none of it.

Earlier in 1:19, Paul had written, “In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” and now in 2:9 he reiterates his point with, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” And then without even pausing, Paul goes right on to say, “you have been filled by him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.” N.T. Wright illuminates these simple but world-altering verses for us:

What he means, simply, is that Jesus was and is not simply a fully human being (though he is); not simply a man remarkably ‘full of God’ (though he’s that as well). He was and is the bodily form taken by God himself, God in all his fullness. He isn’t a demigod, half divine and half human. He doesn’t have a human body and a divine spirit, or mind. He can only be properly understood as the human being who *embodies*, or ‘incarnates’, the fullness of divinity.

This meant, of course, that all the pagan deities and divinities were at once upstaged. The pagan world sometimes spoke of demigods, or heroes who became divine around the time of their death. Jesus wasn’t like that. He was the real thing. But it also meant that Paul was cutting the ground away from any potential attack from the Jewish side. Jews, including Paul himself, believed that God was one. Many, perhaps Paul himself in his pre-Christian days, would have said that therefore Jesus couldn’t be divine; that the best that could be said of his followers, particularly the ex-pagan ones, was that they should now go on to discover the true God, the creator, the sovereign Lord of all. Not so, says Paul: if you want to find the true God, you need look no further than Jesus himself. Verse 9 is perhaps the sharpest and clearest statement in all his writings of his belief that Jesus quite literally embodies the one true God, God in all his fullness.

If you possess Jesus, therefore, you are already ‘fulfilled’ in him, and no rule or

Paul the Pastor

Paul’s vocation, given him by God, was to crisscross the Mediterranean founding Christian colonies across the Roman empire. He was founding churches and helping them grow. It may have been 2,000 years ago in a world far different from our own, but still, many of the problems and opportunities Paul had to deal with are the ones we deal with. Paul was helping new Christians and more mature Christians to grow in their discipleship and to grasp the enormity of the three-word statement: Jesus is Lord. He was helping them find their way to unity in the body of Christ. He was teaching them the full meaning and depth of the Christian proclamation so that they might withstand a hostile world and false teachers of the gospel. In the deepest sense, Paul was helping people to make their way into the people of God and, once there, to make their way toward God and one another . . . toward a genuine with-God life.

Paul’s letters are the oldest writings we have about Jesus and the ushering in of the kingdom of God. Sometimes, people, particularly in television specials, will try to pit Paul against Jesus, as if Paul messed up the simple teachings of Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps this metaphor will help. Imagine Jesus’ life and teachings, his death and resurrection, to be a symphony composed by our Lord. You can think of Paul as that symphony’s first great conductor. The music is Jesus’, but Paul is the one who teaches the orchestra (yes, that is you and me) to play as one beautiful and skilled ensemble.

authority can go, as it were, over his head and impose itself on you. He is the head of them all. The church in our own day still needs to recapture that vision of the supremacy of King Jesus over all other authority.¹

Fullness and forgiveness

If you start with this claim, that Jesus embodies fully the Creator of all that is, then the rest of Paul's claims begin to fall into place. How could we need anyone other than Jesus? To say that there is a way to go to God that doesn't include Jesus is illogical. To say that Jesus is not enough is to say that God is not enough! Jesus is sufficient in all things, for all things.

But Paul doesn't stop even there. He wants us to grasp that in a very real way, we have already died with Jesus and been resurrected with him (v. 12). Already, we are new creations. Already, we have been born anew. Already, forgiveness is ours. All this because Jesus obliterated all our debts, our wrongs, our trespasses by nailing them to a cross. What powerful and direct words and phrases. Is Jesus enough? Is his grace sufficient for all things? The "yes" that is our answer, is the answer the world longs for but doesn't know it or won't hear it.

Of course, the cross looms over all this. New creation came at a price, such a terrible price. Sin and death were not defeated by sword or army, but by one man's willingness to be faithful to God, even to death . . . death on a cross. Andrew Lincoln asks us to consider whether we are really ready to live by the proclamation Paul makes:

The challenge issued to the readers of Colossians is one that remains for Christians: Is this proclamation about Christ's death a metaphor by which we are prepared to live? Do we believe that this answer to the power of evil is really sufficient? The gospel proclaims that Christ has conquered evil; yet, evil still threatens and flourishes. . . . For all readers of Colossians, a major test of authentic adherence to the gospel and to the confession of Christ as Lord is whether they are convinced enough of the sufficiency of God's action in the crucified Jesus to gamble their lives on the paradoxical power of the way of the cross rather than making compromises with other powers.²

The question of whether we are truly ready to embrace and live in the truth that Christ is indeed sufficient for the forgiveness of our sins.

Daily Bible Readings

More from Colossians

Monday, Colossians 1:1-14 Paul gives thanks for the Colossians

Tuesday, Colossians 1:15-23 The supremacy of Jesus Christ

Wednesday, Colossians 2:6-19 The whole passage on the fullness of life in Christ

Thursday, Colossians 3:1-17 Our new life in Christ

Friday, Colossians 3:18-4:6 A household code for the believers in ancient Colossae – look for the mutuality in this code. What do you think would have surprised the first-century Greco-Roman readers?

Saturday, Colossians 4:7-18 Final greetings and benedictions

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of Matthew's Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (pp. 167–168). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

² Lincoln, A. T. (1994–2004). The Letter to the Colossians. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 11, p. 628). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

We have just begun our study of Genesis. It is a great time to join us!
Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle."

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Jesus on Every Page*

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy