

Colossians 2:6-10
“Practicing What We Say We Believe”

Introduction:

In this passage Paul exhorted his readers to remain true to Christ as their lord. And he told them that they were to demonstrate their fidelity to Him by living in a way that was consistent with their profession of faith. In writing this, Paul was beginning the main portion of the letter where he directly addressed the dangerous heresy that had infiltrated the church at Colossae. This passage serves as a transition from what Paul had written in the previous passages, to the exhortations that follow in subsequent passages. Those exhortations flesh out the specific ways that his readers were to demonstrate their continued devotion to Christ (which is the main idea in this passage). In a sense, these verses summarize the overall response that Paul hoped to evoke from his readers by what he wrote in this letter.

I. The Exhortation: (vs.6-7)

In verse six we read, “*As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him*”. The conjunction “*as*” that begins the verse was meant to draw attention to the relationship that should exist between receiving Christ and living for Him. While the word “*therefore*” indicates that Paul was making the following appeal in light of what he had written in the previous passages (1:15-2:5).

The past action that was meant to set a pattern for their ongoing lives was “*you...have received Christ Jesus the Lord*”. The use of the definite article with the noun “*Lord*”, sets this title apart, and thus it puts emphasis on it (indicating that the reception of Jesus specifically involved receiving Him as Lord). But to understand the full sense of the verb “*receive*”, it is helpful to understand that Paul’s use of this verb was apparently influenced by his Jewish heritage. In Judaism, this verb had become a technical expression for receiving religious tradition or instruction. Paul consistently used this verb in the same basic way that rabbinic teachers did. We read elsewhere that Paul used this verb to refer to the reception of various creedal teachings:

- Teachings about the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (I Cor.15:1-4)
- The tradition of the Lord’s Supper (I Cor.11:23)
- The Gospel (Gal.1:9, 12)
- The word of God (I Thess.2:13)
- The ethical tradition of how believers should walk and please God (Phil.4:9; I Thess.4:1).

These observations are important because this is the only place in Paul’s letters where he used this verb with a personal object. In isolation, one might conclude that Paul was writing about receiving Jesus in a personal sense. However, by understanding how Paul regularly used this verb, it helps the reader understand that the idea here is instead the reception of a message about Christ, specifically the Gospel. This conveys that when Paul wrote about receiving Christ here, the

main idea was not simply believing in His person, the primary focus was on how they had embraced the apostolic teaching about Christ. This emphasis was important, because the problem in Colossae was not that they were being tempted to abandon their belief in Christ, rather they were being tempted to believe a radically different teaching about Christ. As Paul continued his flow of thought he would make it clear that their past reception of the Gospel (vs.6-7), was being set in contrast to possibility of them receiving human traditions from false teachers (vs.8). For unlike the Jews of that day, who received the teachings of Judaism from the previous generations of rabbinic teachers, Christians received their teachings from the apostles, who in turn had received them from Christ, who is God.

The future action Paul exhorted them to pursue (in light of their past embrace of the Gospel) was to “*so walk in Him*”. The English word “*so*” does not represent an actual word in the Greek text, rather it completes the thought initiated by the conjunction “*as*” at the beginning of the verse. The Greek verb translated as “*walk*” is in the present tense and in the imperative mode. It represents an exhortation to engage in an ongoing action. That action is referred to in a metaphorical way. One’s “*walk*” represented the manner in which one lived out one’s life. In this context this was primarily an exhortation to continue to live in light of the truths they had been taught about Christ, not allowing their understanding of Him to waver. The words “*in Him*” refer to the sphere that was to define the way they lived their lives, it was to be in a way that was consistent with the truth about who Christ is and what He had taught. These words essentially meant the same thing as what Paul wrote earlier “*live a life pleasing to the Lord*” (1:10). However, the simplicity of this expression can mask the depth of meaning that Paul intended to convey. It expressed a strongly relational concept that predicates their daily life on the union and solidarity they were meant to experience with the risen Christ. As their Lord, Christ established the norms and standards of their new life. He also provided them with both the perspective and motivation they needed in their lives. Finally, Jesus was the dynamic power in their lives who enabled them to fulfill His ethical imperatives, and to live out the values and mission of His kingdom.

In verse seven we read, “*rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.*” As the comma that ended the previous verse conveys, this verse continues the thought that began in the previous verse. Here, Paul used four different participles to describe what he had in mind when he exhorted the Colossians to “*walk in Him*”. The four participles are:

1. “*rooted*”
2. “*built up*”
3. “*established*”
4. “*abounding*”

In the Greek language, the main thought of a sentence is expressed with finite verbs, participles were used to express subordinate ideas. In this case the verb “*walk*” summarizes the exhortation, while the four participles more fully develop what is involved in walking in Christ. It is helpful, in regard to recognizing the

continuity of what Paul wrote in this letter, to observe that what Paul wrote in verse seven parallels what he wrote in reference to his prayer for these saints in the previous chapter (vs.10-12). In both texts Paul used four participles to elaborate on the nature of the walk that should characterize the Christian. Also, both series of participles employed a horticultural metaphor, and both conclude with a reference to thanksgiving (showing that Paul used that earlier prayer to anticipate this exhortation). The relationship between the two is easier seen when they are set side by side:

1:10-12	2:7
Bearing fruit in every good work	Rooted in Him
Growing in the knowledge of God	Built up in Him
Being strengthened in all power	Established in the faith
Giving thanks to the Father	Abounding in thanksgiving

The first participle “*rooted*”, is in the perfect tense. This means that it describes an action that took place in the past but in some sense continues to be an action that is ongoing in the present. This word represents an agricultural metaphor applied to the Christian life, and it conveys the idea of something or someone that is firmly attached to a particular place and is therefore not easily moved. This is an idea that was also expressed in the OT prophets. The prophets taught that God’s people were intended to consciously rest upon His providential care (Jer.12:2), but that there was danger if one was not well rooted in their relationship with God (Isa.40:24). This same warning was repeated by Christ in His parable about the one sowing the seed of the Gospel (Matt.13:6). This participle is in the passive voice, and thus it implies that it is God who enables the believer to take root, rather than the believer doing this on their own.

The second participle is translated as “*built up*”. This participle is in the present tense, which indicates an ongoing action. This is another metaphorical reference, but unlike the previous one, it was not from agriculture, but from construction. Given the parallels that exist between what Paul wrote in his letter to Ephesus and what he wrote to the Colossians, it is likely that the building that he was picturing with this metaphor was the community of God’s people (the Church) which is God’s temple. This seems likely because when Paul used such building metaphors it almost always referred to the people of God as the New Covenant temple of God. It is worth noting that Paul employed both sets of metaphors (agricultural and construction) in the same context in his letter to the Ephesians (2:19-21), and there it clearly referred to the Temple of God. The idea here is that believers are to grow and mature in their faith as a characteristic of their walk in Christ.

The third participle is translated as “*established*”. This participle interprets the two previous metaphors of being rooted and firmly built but extends the focus beyond participation in Christ to a firmness that comes from knowing and appropriating apostolic teaching. It refers to the stability that should be present in the life of the believer that is properly rooted in Christ, that he is to be continually built up in the faith. As with the previous two, this participle is in the passive

voice, conveying that it is God who accomplishes the rooting, the building, and the establishing. Regarding the phrase “*in the faith*”, it refers to the content of what is believed and thus what is in mind is the sphere in which one is established (i.e., the content of the Gospel).

The next phrase in verse seven is “*as you have been taught*”. This is an adverbial clause that modifies the preceding phrase (*established in the faith*). Again, “*the faith*” is defined as the apostolic Gospel that Epaphras had originally taught them. And this reference to having been taught the truths of the Gospel set them in contrast with those who were now listening to a different type of teaching.

The fourth participle is translated as “*abounding*”. This participle is also in the present tense, referring to continuous action, and it refers to possessing something in a quantity that is far in excess of what one can contain, in the sense of an overflowing amount of something. A literal translation of the overall participial phrase is “*abounding in thanksgiving*”. Though this clause is technically fourth in a series of parallel expressions, the first three are semantically linked in meaning since all convey the notion of ongoing growth and stability in the faith. This fourth participial phrase then conveys an additional characteristic of the Christian life that flows out of the previous three. The idea is that as one acquires a more comprehensive understanding of the cardinal truths of the faith and as one grows deeper in their knowledge of the Gospel, and becomes more stable in one’s commitment to it, a profound gratitude toward God will well up within them. The gratitude spoken of here is the spontaneous manifestation of the Divine presence and power within the individual believer. As they enjoy daily fellowship with Christ, gratitude becomes the outward sign of the change that has been accomplished within them by God. Praise completes the circle in which the blessings that flow to us from God, return to Him in the form of our praise and adoration. By taking in the truth of the Word, believers get a strong mind. By living out those truths, they receive full assurance that Christ is who He claimed to be. Assured of that they can appropriate the riches that are His legacy for believers and walk in Him. As they walk in Him, they will grow in Him and become established in their faith, and as a result they will give praise to God.

II. The Warning: (vs.8-10)

Next, Paul wrote, “*Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit*” (vs.8a). The Greek verb translated as “*beware*” means to be attentively on the lookout because one is facing some sort of threat or danger. It is at this point in the letter that Paul begins to specifically address the spiritual threat that was having an influence within the Colossian church. The indefinite term “*anyone*” is sometimes used to refer to unknown individuals who might be involved with something that could threaten the believers. However here, as in his letter to the Galatians (Gal.1:7) Paul used this indefinite term to refer to specific false teachers. Although this more general term may have also been used to include any other person who might come into the fellowship teaching similar falsehoods.

The Greek verb in this clause is translated as “*cheat*” in the NKJV. However, the NASU has a far different rendering, it translates this same Greek verb as “*takes you captive*”. These two English renderings convey distinctly different ideas. Greek lexicons make it clear that the basic meaning of the word is to carry someone or something away. In Paul’s time, this word was often used to refer to the taking of plunder or captives from a defeated army, city, or nation. In light of Paul’s use of other words with military implications earlier in this chapter (vs.5), and his use of a military metaphor later on in this chapter (vs.15), the appearance of this word here is not surprising. It is helpful to recognize that Jesus Himself used similar imagery when He described the binding of the strong man so that he could be robbed of his possessions (Matt.12:29). In that teaching Jesus was alluding to people being taken out of Satan’s dominion. In this case, Paul was applying the imagery to the false teachers taking professing believers away from the Gospel. In a sense, taking them as captives in spiritual warfare. The wording here indicates that Paul did not see what was happening at Colossae as the actions of a misguided Christian. Rather, he saw what was happening as a purposeful attempt to draw Christians away from the things they had originally been taught. This warning here is similar to the one Paul gave to the Galatians (4:3), when he warned them that they were facing the imminent threat of being enslaved once again. The language in both passages served the same purpose, warnings about the spiritual slavery that might result from giving heed to the empty philosophies that were being advanced by false teachers. Therefore, the Greek word used here vividly expressed the danger that Paul was concerned about, that these saints might be carried off as plunder by an alien and fundamentally unchristian teaching that would result in them once again being in bondage to sin.

Paul used the words “*through philosophy and empty deceit*” to express the means by which the false teachers would seek to lead these saints astray. Some popular teachers have argued that here Paul was condemning philosophy in general as something perverse. However, this is not the case. This is because in the first century, any elaborate system of thought and/or moral discipline was referred to as a philosophy, even Pauline Christianity could be referred to as a “*philosophy*”. Instead, Paul was condemning the particular type of philosophy that was being propagated by the false teachers at Colossae. The Greek conjunction translated here as “*and*” indicates that the genitive expression “*empty deceit*” functions epexegetically (meaning that rather than the phrase simply being an additional thought, the phrase was used to specifically characterize the nature of the philosophy that the false teachers were propagating). The Greek word translated as “*empty*” referred to something having no substance or value, while the Greek word translated as “*deceit*” indicated that something was intentionally false and misleading. The use of these two terms together would have been a particularly strong condemnation of the philosophy being taught at Colossae.

Next, Paul wrote that this empty deceitful philosophy was “*according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ*” (vs.8). We read that Paul continued his denunciation of the philosophy of

the false teachers by giving his assessment of it using three parallel prepositional phrases. These phrases all used the same preposition, and a repetitive structure that lent both rhythm and emphasis to the characterization. The three-fold characterization that Paul gave indicated that the teaching was:

- according to the tradition of men
- according to the basic principles of the world
- not according to Christ

All three of these prepositional phrases indicated something about the source of the philosophy that was being taught at Colossae. The Greek word translated as “*tradition*” refers to that which is handed down from one generation to another. Given what is written in the latter half of this chapter the “*traditions of men*” was for the most part a reference to Jewish tradition. Therefore, Paul was using the phrase “*according to the traditions of men*” in a way similar to Jesus (who also used this phrase to characterize the teachings of Judaism). In using the term “*tradition*” here, Paul was not arguing that any and all tradition is wrong, because elsewhere in his letters he referred to traditions as something positive that was to be followed (II Thess.2:15; 3:6). Like many things, traditions can be either good or bad, it depends on the content of the traditions. What indicates that these are unprofitable traditions is that they had their source in men, in human beliefs and speculation. It is important to remember that just because people in general believe something to be true, does not mean that it is or was true. The reality is that tradition often serves merely to perpetuate error.

It is helpful to keep in mind that these false teachers were not advocating the pursuit of an immoral lifestyle. Rather they were advocating something that was much more likely to be accepted by these Christians. The teaching represented a blend of the highest elements of religion known to both Judaism and paganism. According to what we read later in the chapter (vs.11-23), the false teaching that was being spread in this church was a mixture of Christianity, Jewish ceremonialism, angelolatry, and ascetism.

The second way that Paul characterized the philosophy that was being taught at Colossae is that it was “*according to the basic principles of the world*”. The key to understanding this reference is knowing what Paul was referring to when he used the Greek term “*stoicheia*”, that is translated here as “*basic principles*”. Among Evangelicals there are basically three views regarding what Paul was referring to here:

- 1) Elements of the physical world
- 2) Elementary teachings of the world
- 3) Elemental spirits of the world

The Greek word itself denotes an irreducible component; it refers to the most rudimentary aspect of a thing. By its very nature, this word is non-specific and can refer to the rudimentary part of almost anything. To know precisely what a person had in mind when using this word, the reader or listener would have to discern this from the context where the word was used. According to those who hold the first view, the word refers to the material elements of the universe. It is argued that

lexical evidence strongly supports that this is what the term always means unless there is something in the context that proves otherwise. However, although it is true that this was the most common way that the term was used in Greek literature, it is misleading to suggest that this was the only way the term was used, and therefore, the isolated data cited in such arguments is not very persuasive. A number of scholars who embrace this view point out that in the first century people did not make a strong distinction between animate creatures and inanimate things (like there is in our time). As an example, ancient people worshipped the stars as living beings that guided events on earth. Gods and spirits could dwell in various inanimate objects. This understanding that the elements had religious significance would make this interpretation somewhat compatible with Paul's flow of thought in this context. However, the big problem with this conclusion is that Paul does not specifically argue against this sort of belief in the letter. Therefore, it is very unlikely that this is what Paul had in mind.

The second position is that the word "*stoicheia*" refers to basic or rudimentary teachings, specifically to traditional Jewish teachings based on the Law of Moses. This is a more likely option than the previous position because later in the chapter we read that Paul wrote about basic elements of the Law of Moses that the false teachers were compelling others to observe. So, in a sense there was genuinely some of this going on. However, the problem is explaining why the same basic idea would be expressed using two different participial phrases ("*according to the traditions of men*" and "*according to the basic principles of the world*"), leaving the third to express a contrast. Also, how could anything that had been derived from the Law of Moses reflect the world as its source? Even more troubling is that this interpretation only explains some of the things Paul writes in this letter, not all.

The best option is to understand that Paul was referring to "*elementary spirits*" of the world. This is an understanding that is reflected in a number of modern English translations (ESV, NET, RSV). This understanding of the term means it was used as an equivalent expression to "*principalities and powers*". Thus, explaining why Paul made mention so often of these beings in this letter. Even more importantly, this is a meaning that easily fits into the other three times that Paul used this word in his letters (Gal.4:3, 9; Col.2:20). And the idea that evil spirits were a source of false doctrine is something that Paul wrote about elsewhere (Gal.1:8; I Tim.4:1). And Paul's use of this word in Galatians, where he characterized the "*stoicheia*" as weak and miserable, points to the likelihood that he was referring to living beings, not to abstract ideas or religious principles (Gal.4:9). Since Paul was attacking the false teachings by characterizing them as instruments of evil spiritual forces (a distinctly Christian idea), this polemical intent explains why he was motivated to use this word in a way that is not paralleled in ancient Greek literature in general.

The third statement characterized the false teachings as "*not according to Christ*". Obviously, this phrase means that the philosophy that was being advanced in this church was contrary to what Christ Himself had taught. The false teachers were apparently not denying that Christ played a crucial role in God's saving

purposes. Rather, they seem to have been arguing that Christ's redemptive work alone was insufficient, that certain additional practices needed to be embraced by the individual believer in order to achieve true spiritual fulfillment.

In verses eleven through twenty-three of this chapter, Paul will address many specific aspects of the false teaching to complement the general description he provided in these verses.

In verse nine we read, "*For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily*". The wording in this verse is very similar to the wording in 1:19. The prepositional phrase "*in Him*", because of its position in the sentence, is emphatic, the thought being that in Christ alone the fullness of deity dwells. The Greek word translated as "*Godhead*" refers to the entire glorious total of all that God is. In ancient Greek usage this term was used to express the idea of essence or substance, and it is used here by Paul to refer to the substance of deity. The most likely explanation for his use of this term here is that Paul wanted to put stress on the idea that everything that God is, was in Christ, an idea which this term would effectively communicate. The form of the noun used by Paul is best taken as a genitive of content, meaning that this word, together with the reference to "*all the fullness*", points to God Himself, in all His essence, dwelling in Christ. Also, the present tense of the verb translated as "*dwells*" indicates that this function of Jesus as the fullness of God in bodily form is ongoing. In contemporary Greek thought, the term "*fullness*" would have referred to the transcendent God, a being who was considered so transcendent that it was necessary for a long succession of intermediaries to connect that God with mankind. But here, contrary to that idea, Paul was saying that all that represents God did not exist in multiple beings but was found completely in the person of Jesus Christ.

Some theologians argue that the body that Paul refers to here is the Church. It is further argued that this is characteristic of the New Covenant, that Christ in His people has replaced the temple and tabernacle as the focus of God's presence and as the nucleus of God's people. However, though the Ecclesiological connection cannot be denied, Paul's focus in this verse was to provide justification for the claim in verse eight, and the focus there was undeniably Christological. Also, the parallel that exists between this verse and 1:19 further argues against the above interpretation. This verse is purely Christological and affirms the full deity of Christ in His bodily existence, a mode of existence that He assumed in His incarnation and now retains in His resurrected and glorified body. The statement here summarizes and builds upon the high Christology of the previous chapter, while explicitly and emphatically avoiding any hint of disdain for physical matter. Paul thus avoided the dualism that Christians in the latter portion of the century fell into, as they attempted to explain the divine nature of Christ. Their explanation led to the docetic heresy (2 John 7), Paul's was an articulation of orthodoxy. The incarnation presupposes a permanent union of Christ's Divine and human natures. Just as He did not surrender His deity at the incarnation, so Christ did not surrender His humanity at His resurrection and ascension. This emphasis upon Christ's ongoing physicality may have been expressed by Paul as

part of his argument against the ascetic practices promoted by the false teachers. Such false teaching was often rooted in the idea that one must deny bodily pleasure because they believed that all matter was inherently evil. However, since Christ not only came in a body that was a crucial instrument in God's redemption and deliverance, but will stay eternally in a glorified body, this would tend to prove that the notion that matter itself was evil, was false.

Next Paul wrote, "*and you are complete in Him*" (vs.10a). What gets slightly lost in the New King James translation is that the word translated in this verse as "*complete*" is the same one that is translated as "*fullness*" in verse nine. Therefore, Paul, having written about how the fullness of what God is dwells in Christ, here connected that idea to the additional thought that because of the believer's union with Christ, that fullness is now available to the believer. And Paul wrote this to again stress the idea that in Christ the believer has access to everything that God is, and thus believers do not need anything or anyone in addition to Christ, for in Him they have everything they will ever need to have a vibrant relationship with God. The tenses of the verb and participle in this short phrase "*you are complete*" indicates that the state of fullness that the believer enjoys was accomplished in the past (at conversion) and is continually sustained throughout one's life. Of course, this reference to being "*complete*" does not mean that the perfection of Christ is transfused into us. Rather, it means that in Christ the believer has access to all the resources necessary to experience spiritual fullness, so that nothing God wishes to accomplish in us is beyond our reach. Paul's teaching here was connected to the poetic declaration he made about Christ in the previous chapter. This connection shows that what he had previously written about Christ was relevant to the life of the Church as a whole and to each individual. Paul's purpose in this letter was not primarily to prompt reflection on who Christ is for a doxological purpose, but to show that the revelation of God in Christ had profound implications for the daily life of the saints.

As observed before, Paul's repeated use of the idea of completeness and fullness, reflected his concern to counter the claims of the false teachers that fullness could be found through some other means than through Christ.

Paul then concluded this passage by writing, "*who is the head of all principality and power*" (vs.10b). The antecedent of the relative pronoun "*who*" is Christ (vs.8). Here Paul used the word "*head*" to describe Jesus' relationship to all principality and power. This word, when used metaphorically (as it is used here), normally refers to both authority and source blended together into a singular meaning. Thus, Paul was teaching that the principalities and powers owed their existence to Christ and also were in subjection to His authority. As in the first chapter (vs.16), the titles "*principality*" and "*power*" refer to demonic spirits who were seen by people in that day as having real power and authority over human beings and the natural world. The main idea Paul wanted his readers to grasp was that Christ had complete power over these spiritual entities, meaning that He was the one who ultimately determined what they could and could not do. Paul once again included the qualifying word "*all*" to make it clear that no spirit being existed outside of

Christ's universal reign. Therefore, there was no reason to fear or acknowledge these creatures. This was necessary because it is likely that these saints were struggling to resist fearing these creatures, sharing to some extent the societal concern about the ongoing impact these principalities and powers might have on their daily lives. This concern made them vulnerable to the teachings, knowledge, and rituals of the shamanistic leader of the faction. Part of Paul's solution was to help these believers comprehend the full significance of what it meant for them to be in Christ. Since they shared in His fullness, they shared in His authority over the demonic powers. This realization, if embraced, would enable them to overcome their fear of these spirits. This statement thus functions as the lead argument for the rest of the section, by stressing the power and sufficiency of Christ for believers who are in a dynamic union with Him. Because of this union, they did not need to call upon angels, nor perform any of the rituals of power prescribed by the heretic philosophy.

Conclusion:

In this passage Paul was urging the Christians at Colossae to continue in their faith in the Gospel that they had originally been taught. He reminded them that continuing in the faith meant living out each day in conformity to those things that Christ had taught regarding who they were in Him. He admonished them to do this because in their midst was one or more individuals who was teaching a perverted version of the Gospel. If these saints were not well established in the truths of the true Gospel, they might be deceived into believing the false one. Paul wanted them to understand that this new version of the Gospel was not from Christ but represented the ideas of men and the lies of demons. This false gospel promised a fuller life in Christ. This was a lie, because in Christ they had access to the fullness of God.