

What is the Foundation of Your Life?

Colossians 2:6-15

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 23, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

⁹For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Colossians 2:6-15, NRSV)



Sacramento, the City of Trees, took a big hit this winter. Two major storms took out over 1000 trees in our city, some right here in our own neighborhood. Some of us were directly impacted. Many redwood trees were among that number. As you may know, redwoods are not native to this area. And one of the problems we have with them here is that people planted them in isolation. Redwoods have shallow but widespread root systems, which are designed to intertwine with the roots of other neighboring redwood trees to provide stability during strong winds and floods. This is why they naturally grow in groves, so

that they can literally hold one another up. One redwood tree all by itself, like the one we have in our backyard, is especially vulnerable because the foundation is weak.¹

It's common sense. A foundation is critical. If you're building a house you always start with the foundation and make sure you get that right before you build upwards. Nobody finishes the roof and the electrical work on a new home and then wonders aloud, "Maybe we should think about putting in a foundation at some point?" Everything starts with a solid foundation.

Paul makes this obvious point to the church in verse 6, applying it to the Christian life: "**So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.**" He asks us to think back to when we first became Christians. At that point we received a solid foundation, Christ himself. But of course, the foundation, while a critical beginning, is not enough in the end.

By definition, a foundation is laid to hold something else up. You don't just have a foundation there by itself. It's there to support a structure. And in this case, Christ in us is a solid foundation upon which we are to be built up in him, strengthened in the faith, transformed into continuously grateful people. As we talk about all the time around here, placing your faith in Christ is just the beginning. The primary goal of your life from that point forward, is to then be formed in the image of Christ, to be with Jesus so that you can become like Jesus so that you can do what Jesus did. I've heard it said that the Christian life is like riding a bike, unless you go forward you fall off.²

Keeping all that in mind, here's the danger, and the point Paul is trying to make here. It is very, very easy to root ourselves in another foundation other than Christ. When that happens, it doesn't matter what we build, it will not endure. That's what is behind Paul's warning here in verse 8, a warning to make sure nobody "**takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy...**" Remember the dangers the

¹ To learn more about these amazing trees go to: <https://sempervirens.org/learn/redwood-facts/#FactList>

² N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Westminster John Knox, 2002), 164.

Colossians were facing in those days, the reason Paul writes this letter in the first place. A philosophy called Gnosticism, which was very prevalent at that time, was sneaking into the church and trying to distort the truth about who Jesus actually was. On top of that, influential Jews in that city were doing their best to convince these new Gentile Christians that they needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses if they were truly going to be saved, that the grace of Christ was not enough. Needless to say, the threats were real and coming from several fronts.

What these threats shared in common was their intention to take the focus off Jesus, either by demoting him to an inferior place, even claiming he wasn't truly God, or by insisting that he wasn't the sole mediator between people and God, that there were other means of salvation. I hope you can see that these are threats the church still faces today. Specifically, most world religions, along with most secular people outside the church, give honor to Jesus as an influential teacher, a wise prophet, a powerful miracle-worker, and certainly a beautiful example of a human life we ought to emulate. But in every case there is a subtle effort to move him to an inferior place than the divine and eternal Son of God. Many even in the church these days also are open to the idea that though Jesus saves, he is not the only means of salvation. It's quite common to hear people declare that there are lots of ways to get to God other than Jesus. And in the end, it's not the outright attacks against Christ that are a threat, as much as the subtle shifts where people still honor Jesus, even revere Jesus, but twist, even slightly, who he is and what he has done.

Now, Paul actually is very encouraged by the health and soundness of this small congregation in Colossae. From all reports, they have not bought into these false and destructive teachings. But he is also wise enough to know that they are still vulnerable, because we all are vulnerable. In general, I am encouraged by the health of this congregation, and by the clarity I see in you when it comes to the truth about Christ. But we also are not immune to such threats. I have seen more than a few people over my years here deceived by these sorts of false teachings. Many in our own denomination have been similarly deceived as they have allowed the truth about Christ to be diluted or confused. And so we must heed Paul's warning here and remain vigilant, making certain that we are not rooting our faith on, as Paul puts it, "human tradition" or "elemental spiritual forces

of this world", but on Christ and Christ alone. For there is no other worthy foundation.

And here's why; Paul could not be more clear. "**For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.**" This is a fundamental and nonnegotiable truth of the Christian faith, that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. Jesus is not God who puts on the costume of humanity for a time to pretend he is one of us. Neither is Jesus a good man who became so good and so favored that he was promoted to the level of divinity. No, Christ's sharing in the life of God is not at the expense of his equal sharing in our humanity. Mysteriously, both are true at the same time.³ Jesus is fully God *and* Jesus is fully human.

I sometimes hear people speak as if Jesus and God are somehow different. Somebody says for instance, "Jesus prayed to God." But that's not right. Jesus is God. He prayed to his Father. He was full of the Spirit. All three are together and mysteriously God. Jesus is God just as the Father is God, just as the Spirit is God. When we look at Jesus we are looking at God, but God who has also become human, one of us.

One of our creeds, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, states this clearly and beautifully. I'll ask the questions and invite you to answer them, paying attention to the answers:

Question 4: What is God?
Answer: God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.⁴

Question 5: Are there more Gods than one?
Answer: There is but one only, the living and true God.⁵

Question 6: How many persons are there in the Godhead?
Answer: There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.⁶

³ Ralph Martin, *Interpretation Commentary: Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon* (John Knox Press, 1991), 114.

⁴ John 4:24; Job 11:7-9; Ps. 90:2; Jas. 1:17; Ex. 3:14; Ps. 147:5; Rev. 4:8; 15:4; Ex. 34:6-7.

⁵ Deut. 6:4; Jer. 10:10.

⁶ 1 John 5:7; Matt. 28:19.

Reflecting on this reality, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright declares, “Christianity is Christ. Put him in the middle of your picture of the world, and the world will stop spinning in incomprehensible circles and begin to make sense.”⁷ Not only that, if we root ourselves in Christ, we are rooting ourselves in the very source of all that is, all life, all goodness, all flourishing. This is why Paul speaks here of being brought to “fullness” in Christ. He is the Vine that nourishes and produces fruit, the Good Shepherd that leads, the Living Water that satisfies, the Bread of Life that sustains, the Light of the World that illuminates, the Bridegroom who loves, the Lamb of God who sacrifices himself, the Door through which we must pass.

On top of that, Christ is, as Paul declares, “**head over every power and authority.**” The things in this life and the next that worry you, things that cause you concern or even fear, if you are in Christ and Christ is in you, why do you worry? What is there to be afraid of? Do you think cancer is more powerful than Jesus? How about war? Or climate change? Or corrupt political leaders? What about death, is death more powerful than Jesus? I’ve always loved how Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper, put it, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”

Why would we ever root our lives in any other foundation besides Christ? And yet we do. And this is the nature of sin itself. Pastor Tim Keller defines sin this way: “Sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God.”⁸ There are other ways to define sin, but that’s as good a definition as I’ve heard. Most people think about sin as “breaking God’s rules”. But the Bible makes clear, specifically in Jesus’ teaching, that sin is ultimately not doing bad things, but making good things into ultimate things. As Keller suggests, it’s deciding to root your life in something else besides God, and then striving to find ultimate identity, security and purpose in that other thing. That’s sin.

One of the alternative foundations in Paul’s day was circumcision, and what it signified for the Jews. It’s why he brings it up here in his letter. As you may know, the Jews were not the only ones in those days practicing circumcision. In fact, most other cultures around them in the ancient Middle East also embraced this practice. What made it unique for the Jews was the

significance they attached to this rite. For them it became a mark of identity as God’s chosen and blessed people. This idea came from God. At one point God tells Abraham, the father of the Jews, “**You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.**”⁹ The Jews obeyed from that point forward and every Jewish male was circumcised as a sign of this covenant.¹⁰

But remember, circumcision was never to be just about circumcision. It was a sign pointing to something greater, a reminder that God had chosen Israel by his grace to be his people. This wasn’t merited, something the Jews earned because they were somehow better than other people. But in time they forgot this, and allowed the sign to become the thing itself. Their flesh may have reflected God’s covenant, but their hearts did not. At one point the prophet, Jeremiah, declared that “**the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.**”¹¹ This is what Paul is pointing to here in verse 11 when he speaks of a “spiritual circumcision.” Do you see his point? It’s not enough to rely on religious practices or markers, as good as they may be, in place of relying on God himself. We are not justified by our religion. Instead, our religion must be a response to God who is the only one who justifies us.

For us, of course, it’s not about circumcision. That’s not our issue. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have our own version of the same mistake. John Ortberg writes this in his book, *The Live You’ve Always Wanted*,

The senior pastor of the church I grew up in could have been consumed with pride and resentment, but as long as his preaching was orthodox and the church was growing, his job would probably not be in jeopardy. But if some Sunday morning he had been smoking a cigarette while greeting people after service, he would not have been around for the evening service. No one at the church would have said that smoking a single Camel was a worse sin than a life consumed with pride and resentment. But for us, cigarette-smoking became an identity maker. It was one of the ways we were able to tell the sheep from the goats.¹²

Circumcision is a good thing. Not smoking cigarettes is also a good thing, at least for your own personal health. Baptism is a good thing. So is church membership,

⁷ Wright, 162.

⁸ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, 2008), 162. For an extended summary of Keller’s thoughts on this, go to <https://rachelgreenmiller.com/2012/09/26/tim-keller-sin-hell-and-homosexuality/#:~:text=Dr.%20Keller%20also%20gives%20his%20definiton%20of%20sin,to%20get%20an%20identity%2C%20apart%20from%20him.%20%E2%80%A6>

⁹ Genesis 17:11. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). See this affirmed in Joshua 5:29.

¹⁰ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, edited by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III (Intervarsity Press, 1998), 148-149.

¹¹ Jeremiah 9:26

¹² John Ortberg, *The Live You’ve Always Wanted* (Zondervan, 1997). 32-33.

along with going to worship on Sundays, and reading your Bible, and wearing a cross necklace or tattoo, or giving your money or time in service of the poor. All good things. It's when we allow these good religious things to become merely external markers that don't reflect a heart within, that we have ceased to make Christ the foundation. Remember, it's not just money, sex, power, fame, and other gods that can become idols. Religion is probably the most dangerous idol of all, mostly because on the outside it looks so much like the real thing.

Again, sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God. And this is not just a danger for others. It's a danger for you, a danger for me. In fact, this is the default position of the human heart, to seek a foundation in life other than Christ. It's the human condition, our sinful nature. You know, God offers us everything, life eternal and abundant, all the blessings of Christ, and in response we essentially say to God, "We know that everything we have is from you, the very source of every good thing in life. Our lives are a gift from you and depend on you. But sorry, we are going to take everything of yours you have given us, which is everything we have, and we are going to go and find another foundation for our lives, another source for living besides you. Yes, we may give you lip service from time to time, even put on some religious costume that makes us look like we trust you alone, but in the end we believe a better life is to be found elsewhere." That's the essence of sin, as best as I can put it.¹³

Here's the problem, of course. If Jesus Christ truly is the only source and sustainer of life, the only worthy foundation, what happens when we disconnect ourselves from him? It's not complicated. If I cut a branch off a tree, its source of life, what happens to that branch? Eventually it shrivels up and dies. I say "eventually", because for a while that branch can appear to be still full of life. But give it time. Eventually the deadness will be undeniable.

That's the deception among us. We are surrounded by people who have chosen another foundation and source of life besides Jesus. Some of us are likely still in that category. And from the outside it appears that there is life in such people. In fact, it's not hard to find people in our world who have absolutely rejected God, and yet seem to be living productive and flourishing lives. That's the deceptive part. Because unless something changes, it's only a matter of time before the deadness shows up, because again there is ultimately no life apart from Christ. And that's not my idea; that comes

straight from Jesus. In John 15 he declares that he is the Vine and that we are the branches. Branches which abide in him, thrive and bear much fruit because he is the source of life. However, the opposite is equally true. In his words, "**Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.**" Ultimately there is no life apart from Christ.

Now to be clear, this isn't just a problem for some people, or for other people. It is, of course. But first it's *our* problem, or at least at one point was our problem before God saved us. Right? Who among us here today does not have the tendency to try and make a life out of seeking ultimate identity, security and meaning in something other than Christ? We all have that tendency. Don't be deceived, though outward appearances may tell a different story, this is the default position of your heart, and my heart as well. Our nature is to seek life anywhere but the very source of life.

But here is the good news, and Paul cannot state it any more clearly than he does here. It's so good, let me read it at length:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Friends, believe this good news of the gospel. *In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!*

In Paul's day when Roman generals were victorious in battle, they would march their vanquished captives in chains through the streets of the city at the end of the war. Well, the war to end all wars took place at the cross. We didn't fight in the battle, but we were the prize. It was Christ who went to war against our greatest enemies of sin and death, enemies which had enslaved us. And just when it appeared that he had been defeated in death, Christ emerged from the tomb victorious, sin nailed to the cross, death buried in the empty tomb. This means that though there is nothing in us that makes us worthy of such a gift - in fact, our persistent rejection of this gift has condemned us! - we have nonetheless been shown total grace and mercy

¹³ Isn't this beautifully portrayed in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, specifically in the decision of the younger son to take what his father

had given him and cut himself off from the father. Read this in Luke 15:11-32.

from God because, for some reason which we may never be able to explain or understand, he loves us and is willing to give up everything to have us for himself.

All this begs the question Paul is asking here. If this is what Christ has done for you, and you have come to believe it and placed your faith in Christ as the foundation of your life, why then would you not give yourself fully to living your life in him, rooting yourself in him, being built up in him that you might one day find yourself fully established in your faith?

Remember, a foundation is just the beginning. And so in the rest of his letter, Paul emphasizes what he hints at here in verse 11, when he says we are to be **“putting off the body of the flesh.”** In the next chapter he’ll develop this metaphor of stripping ourselves of every sinful habit and tendency, so that we can then clothe ourselves with the things of Christ.¹⁴ It’s what we talked about last week when we spoke about the renovation of the heart, allowing Jesus to move into our lives and then go room by room and transform our entire lives to reflect him, mostly in the way we love. As I hope you know, this is no easy process, and it’s often slow, painful, and costly. In fact, it takes a lifetime.

Christian philosopher Dallas Willard was once asked by a student how long it takes Jesus to renovate the heart and life of one of his followers. Have you ever wondered about that? How long will it take Jesus to help you live life as he would live life if he were in your shoes? Dallas thought about the question and then answered, “Well, I suppose it takes *at least 50 years.*” 50 years? His student wanted to know why he came up with that number. “Because that’s how long I’ve been following Jesus in my life,” he said, “and he’s still not done with me.”¹⁵

I regularly meet people in their 80’s and 90’s, some of them right here in this church, who have been following Jesus for at least that long and they are still growing, still changing, still learning to love today better than they loved yesterday. I imagine that such people would tell you that the key for them has been that all along they have kept their eyes fixed on Jesus, the one in whom the fullness of God not only dwells but has been made fully available to us. He is our only foundation in life. If your life is built on him as your foundation, I believe that in the end you will look back without one single regret.

Amen.



¹⁴ See Colossians 3:1-17.

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage Colossians 2:6-15. What stands out to you?
2. Paul declares that, **“in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,”** that Christ is fully God and fully human. Do you believe this?
3. Most people tend to deemphasize one aspect of Christ’s nature, either his divinity or his humanity. Which has been the temptation for you? Do you have a harder time believing Jesus is human, or believing Jesus is divine?
4. Is Christ the foundation upon which your whole life is built? Why or why not? And what does that even mean to you?
5. Tim Keller defines sin this way: “Sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God.” Do you agree? If so, in what other foundation besides Christ are you most tempted to find your identity? What has been the most tempting idol for you in life?
6. Paul speaks here about the threats of **“hollow and deceptive philosophy”** that lead us away from the truth about Christ and can even infect the church. What form do these take in our day and in our society?
7. Read verses 13-15 again. What do these verses mean to you personally, especially as you think about your own sin and your relationship with God?
8. How has Christ specifically spoken to you through this message? What is your response?




Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.

Is Jesus God or is Jesus human?

¹⁵ Source unknown.