

Sunday 13th August 2023 Full-on Faith series.

Colossians 2: 'Growing in Faith'

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Colossians 2. *I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. ² My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.*

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

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

⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹ In 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, ¹² having 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.

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you^[d] alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.^[e]

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of

angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. ¹⁹ They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Last week Dave and Sarah introduced our sermon series for August called *Full-on faith*, looking at Paul’s letter to the Colossians. We’re covering a whole chapter each week which I’ll admit is somewhat ambitious given how rich this text is, but sometimes it is better to zoom out a bit to see the bigger picture and try to understand what originally motivated Paul to write in the way that he did.

Paul wrote this letter from prison to the church at Colossae which had been planted by Epaphras. We see pretty quickly that the letter springs from a deep pastoral concern, as Paul urged the congregation to keep growing in faith and not to be derailed by cultural pressures or divisive teaching within the church.

He begins chapter 2 by saying ‘I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.’ The word he uses for contend is the Greek word *Agone* from which we get our word *Agony*. For a shepherd to see his flock struggling or spiritually vulnerable is an agonising thing. Paul wrestled in prayer for all the churches and decided that writing this letter was the best way to encourage them and warn them about a few issues too. And thank God he did because we get to hear God’s voice to us too through these words.

So perhaps we should hear these opening sentences addressed to us here today.

‘I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at All Saints, and for all who have not met me personally. ² My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God,

namely, Christ, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.'

Bang. There it is. Paul lifts the lid on the cause of his concern. Deception and controversy.

⁴I tell you this so that no one may *deceive* you by *fine-sounding arguments*.

The Church at Colossae was in danger on several fronts. They were in danger from divisive teaching inside the church, as well as the challenge of cultural forces outside the church too.

Sounds to me not too dissimilar to the situation we find ourselves facing today.

We have to face the fact that the mainstream Church in the UK is still declining. Although the 2021 census reported that 46% of the population still choose to identify as Christian, the number of people reporting they have 'no religion' has increased to 37%. Anglican churches have taken the biggest hit with a drop of 34% in the last 10 years, with our core membership getting older each year.

So what do we do about this agonising situation? Well like Paul we should be wrestling in prayer but also thoughtfully exposing and challenging some of the deceptive faith killers that prowl around looking for churches to devour.

Here in chapter 2 Paul warns the church to resist four things which if left unchecked could squeeze the life out of the fellowship, and they are just as toxic for us today. He tells them:

- Don't let people deceive you with fine sounding arguments. (v4)
- Don't be taken captive with hollow and deceptive philosophy. (v8)
- Don't let anyone judge you. (v16)
- Don't let puffed up spirituality disqualify you (v18)

Paul warns that if we are not careful, we can easily be deceived, judged or feel disqualified and cut off from experiencing the full measure of God's love and power.

So, let's look at these in a little more detail, and I'll take them in reverse order. Let's start with judgmentalism and puffed up spirituality and then we'll look at some of the hollow and deceptive philosophy that can all too easily worm its way into our thinking.

Paul was particularly concerned about the growing threat of a movement called *Gnosticism* within the church which suggested that there were higher levels of secret spiritual knowledge that could only be accessed by gifted individuals who could somehow transcend the physical realm. Paul strongly refuted this because faith in Jesus makes Christianity a level playing field for everyone who trusts in him.

I remember a few years ago there was a great flurry of excitement about a healing revival centred around a certain evangelist in Florida. It was all very compelling. But as soon as he started claiming to be receiving prophetic insight from a particular Angel (apparently called Emma), it turned sour. He was soon exposed for various affairs and the fruit was short lived. Spiritual elitism is not welcome in the Church of God, so be on your guard against it. Don't let anyone make you feel disqualified on the basis of some supposed secret insights. Whether you are a contemplative or a charismatic, it is simply heartfelt love and dependence on Jesus that saves and unites us. Christ plus nothing is enough. Yes, we want to see revival here. Yes, I want to see the Holy Spirit pouring out signs and wonders and miracles and I am praying for a new season of grace to come. But only as long as Jesus is honoured and we resist know-it-all egoism and any form of spiritual elitism.

But as far as society around us is concerned, instead of Gnosticism, it seems like the pendulum is swinging to opposite extreme when it comes to hollow and deceptive philosophy. There are some current ways of thinking that are eroding our society and are corrosive to faith.

You are probably familiar with some of the worldly ways of thinking that affect us such as *naturalism* - the philosophical belief that everything arises from natural properties and causes, and supernatural or spiritual explanations are excluded or discounted.

Closely coupled to naturalism is the problem of *scientism* which is the belief that the only valid knowledge is scientific knowledge. Scientism holds that unless a theory can be proven by repeatable experiment, it cannot be true. We hear the expression 'Scientists have discovered...' all the time as a designation of a higher authority.

You may equally be aware that you are affected by *individualism* in the West with 'I did it my way' still being the most popular funeral song and a growing problem of isolation because of our rejection of community interdependence.

There are many other related philosophies and *isms* that are pervading our society but part of the problem is that trying to define them is like trying to hold on to slippery eels. The first is post-modernism.

Friedrich Nietzsche died in 1900 but he has been called the father of *post-modernism* for his rejection of absolute truth, especially God as the source of truth and human identity. Instead of being dictated to by society or religion, Nietzsche suggested a meaningful life is one that strives for *self-expression*. Instead of seeking God or a heavenly afterlife, Nietzsche believed the only value we have is in the here and now. Instead of comfort, only self-expression must be pursued. You will have heard this post-modern philosophy most clearly expressed as 'be true to yourself'. The trouble is that when we 'search for the hero inside ourselves', we are most often disillusioned by what we find. We are mostly fragile and broken people in need of renewal. However, the Christian message is that despite our human brokenness we are created by God with a purpose, and our true new identity is to be found in Christ. But it seems our children are being taught that meaning is to be found through trying to manufacture your own identity. You can see how this results in hollow thinking and lack of hope. I think this is where much of our current mental health crisis springs from.

Also particularly over the last few decades in the UK we are seeing the rise of *humanism*, (formerly called secular humanism) as the popular philosophical stance of choice for academics and scientists. The Humanists UK website defines a humanist as someone who:

- trusts the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejects the idea of the supernatural.
- makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals
- believes that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.

Some humanist values are appealing, because of course many Christians embrace scientific methodology – remember that it was the church that founded the first universities based on the view that God had made us with reasoning minds to seek out truth of the universe. We also certainly wrestle with ethical decisions based on reason, empathy and concern for others.

But the rejection of anything supernatural and declaring the absence of any discernible purpose to the universe means that we will end up becoming a law

unto ourselves. Our inevitable bias towards selfishness is excused by our genetic disposition towards survival. It is logically incoherent to say that we can all act to give our own lives meaning and happiness without harming others, unless we agree on an external framework for accountability. But who provides that accountability? Without an objective, transcendent judge or standard all we have are individual preferences to guide us. So, laws become determined by those who shout loudest or have the widest internet reach.

The deadly combination of Post-modern individualism and humanism just puts ourselves at the centre of our worldview. This is a hollow and deceptive philosophy. Just as the word Sin has 'I' at the centre of it, Paul writes that sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death. Instead of being full of ourselves, Paul's message to the Colossians is that fulfilment can only be found in Christ. He is the one who gives us meaning and purpose. Chapter 1 says that He holds the whole universe together. Without Christ, all we are left with is a God shaped hole. But in verse 9 Paul categorically states: *In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness.*

A fulfilled life only comes from full-on faith in Christ. It might be agonising at times as we wrestle together to take hold of it. But full life is growing in the new God-centred life that Jesus won for us on the cross. V13: *'God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.'*

Let's give thanks for Jesus and all he has given us.