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**Letter to the Colossians**



The Apostle Paul is widely agreed upon as the author of the letter to the Colossians. In the early church, all who speak on the subject of authorship ascribe the letter to Paul. Some scholars believed that due to stylistic differences in the writing, and what was thought to be a more developed theology than in previous letters, Paul could not have been the author of Colossians. However, when we consider that Paul is addressing specific theological concerns (though with universal application), we see that there isn’t anything inconsistent with his theology elsewhere in the New Testament. Furthermore, there is actually strong continuity of style between this letter and others from Paul that are thought to have been written during the same period. Timothy, who is also mentioned in the opening of the letter, probably wrote for Paul as he dictated.

This letter was most likely written during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome, where he spent at least two years under house arrest (see Acts 28:16-31). Some have argued that Paul wrote Colossians from Ephesus or Caesarea, but most of the evidence favors Rome as the place where Paul penned all of the ‘prison’ letters, including Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon. The letter was probably written around A.D. 61, since after that a major earthquake struck the region and Colossae was ravaged. The destruction in the city would surely have been mentioned by Paul had the letter been written later than this.



At one time, Colossae had been a thriving major city in the region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). It was located on the great east-west trade route between Ephesus and the Euphrates River. But by the First Century, Colossae had been surpassed by other cities like Hierapolis and Laodicea and was relegated to being a second-rate city. During Paul’s tenure in Ephesus, a Colossian named Epaphras had apparently been converted and took the gospel with him back to his hometown. As a result of Epaphras’ faithful proclamation of the gospel, many disciples were made and a church sprung up.

However, the young church fell prey to heretical influences, which led pastor Epaphras to seek out help from the Apostle Paul in Rome, and ultimately led to the writing of the letter to the Colossian church. The nature of the heresy in Colossae is never explicitly described, but it can be inferred from analysis of Paul’s refutation that it was **religious** **syncretism** – *the attempted fusion of different (often contradictory) religious beliefs*. The Colossian syncretism was diverse, blending elements of local folk belief, traditional Judaism and early Gnostic mysticism including, ceremonialism, asceticism, and angel worship among other things.



Paul’s primary purpose is to refute the Colossian heresy, and he does this by exalting Christ as greater than all. Jesus is the very image of God (1:15), the Creator (1:16) and sustainer of all things (1:17). He is the head of the Church (1:18) the first to be resurrected (1:18), the fullness of God in bodily form (1:19), and the ultimate reconciler (1:20-22). The first two chapters draw out these and other significant theological truths that root us in the true person of Jesus and protect us from foolish, errant ways of thinking about who he is. The last two chapters focus on the implications of living for Christ. If Jesus is who Paul says he is in chapters 1-2, then the most obvious thing would be for us to live as instructed in chapters 3-4.

**Using this Study Guide**

Take time each week, with a friend or group of friends, to discuss the previous Sunday’s sermon. The following section includes resources to help guide the conversation. For each sermon in the Greater Than series, the hope is that you will **RECAP** the passage.

**R** - Relate. An opening question meant to begin conversation around the theme of the passage.

**E** - Examine. Questions related to the biblical context of the weekly passage, for group examination.

**C** - Chat. A question meant to spark further conversation about the meaning of the passage.

**A** - Apply. Questions for applying the weekly passage to one’s personal life and experience.

**P** - Pray. Instruction on ways to pray for one another in response to the passage and its application.

This study format is not meant to be a rigid formula, but hopefully this curriculum provides a means for intentional study, discussion, and life application.

 *This guide has been made available by Mission Dei Church of Ashville, NC*





As we begin this study of Colossians, we’ll witness how the gospel is shaping a people. What was the spiritual condition of your home growing up? How did this contribute to your spiritual condition today?



* What things have Paul and Timothy heard about the Colossians’ spiritual health that you find compelling?

* Paul says that the gospel has produced not only faith in Christ, but a love for His people. Have you found this to be true? Why or why not?



* Paul also mentions that the gospel is bearing fruit and growing, not only in the world, but in them.

What do you think he mean by this? How does the gospel grow in us? How can you tell if it is growing in you?



* Paul begins his letter explaining how he prays for a people it is likely he had never even met. What kinds of things do you find compel you to pray?

* If it is true that the gospel is not just the ‘doorway’ into Christianity, but the ‘pathway’ of Christianity, what might progress along the pathway look like?

* Paul explains that Ephaphras has been the conduit by which they have learned and grown in their understanding of God’s grace. Who have been instrumental influencers in the development of your faith?

* Who has God given you relationships with that you might influence for the sake of the gospel? What would move you to want to do this?



What evidences of God’s grace can we give thanks for together? Spend some time praying as a group, thanking God for all that he has done for you, and also for individuals you know who have not yet heard or responded to the gospel.





This passage focuses on Paul’s prayer for the continued growth and maturity of the Colossian believers. As you reflect on your journey, what has contributed the most to your spiritual growth in the last year?



* How might you summarize in your own words Paul’s prayer for the Colossian Christians?

* What do you think it means to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord”?

* Verses 13 and 14 provide a succinct explanation of the gospel.

From these verses, what do you most appreciate about what Jesus has done for his people? Why?



* The entire opening section of this letter (v. 3-14) has been a summary of Paul’s prayer on behalf of the Colossian Christians. How do you see Paul’s prayer differing from the way you typically pray for others?



* Notice the forceful words in verses 9-12: *filled* with the knowledge, *all* spiritual wisdom, *fully* pleasing, *every* good work, *all* power, and *all* endurance. What does this imply about the kind of commitment to Jesus we are called to? Why would you desire this kind of commitment?

* Look again at verses 9-12. Which of these specific requests stands out as something that you would like to see God develop more fully in your life? (Try to focus on one) How can we help each other see this happen?

* Why do you think Paul returns to the gospel and its benefits in verses 13-14? How might this be instructive for us as we seek to “bear fruit in every good work and increase in the knowledge of God”?



Take some time together this week to pray through Paul’s prayer for the Colossians. Thank Him for the ways he has been at work maturing you in your faith. Ask the Lord to make the specific areas of growth mentioned during your discussion time more of a reality in your lives.



In this passage, Paul moves into the main thrust of his letter: the supremacy of Christ over all things. What do you think are some of the predominant views of Jesus’ identity these days? What was your own view of Jesus before becoming a Christian? How has that view changed over time?

* Based on this passage, what would you say about Paul’s view of who Jesus is? What attributes jump out at you?

* What do you think it means that in Christ “all things hold together”?

* Verses 21 and 22 provide another “gospel nutshell,” where Paul describes what God does for his people in saving them. How might you summarize the descriptions of our condition before and after being born again?

* Verse 23 implies that remaining stable in the faith is challenging. This is especially true in a cultural climate such as ours. In light of our experiences today, where might we be tempted to shift our hope away from the gospel? How can we combat this?

* Suppose you’re having a conversation about spiritual matters with a friend, relative, associate, or neighbor. He or she says something like, “Jesus was a great spiritual teacher who did lots of things to help people, but I don’t think he was God.” Based on this text, how might you address this in a respectful and biblical manner?

* How does knowing that in Christ you are considered, “holy and blameless and above reproach” affect you? When you think about God peering down from Heaven at you, on a scale of 1 (impossible) to 10 (miraculous) how difficult is it to imagine that this is how He sees you? Why?

* When it comes to their affection for God, Paul describes the unsaved as “alienated and hostile.” Therefore, in contrast, Christ-followers should be marked by passion for God and closeness with him. How would you describe your current spiritual ‘temperature’? If a ‘warmer’ climate is needed, what has to change?

As you gathering to pray, consider using this passage as a guide. Give Jesus the praise He is due for who He is, and thank Him for what He has done to reconcile you to Himself. Also, spend time in prayer for those you know who are still “alienated” from God, that they too, might come to recognize Jesus’ supremacy.



In this passage, Paul explains that his primary calling to make the word of God ‘fully known’ is fraught with challenges, but challenges his faces gladly. What is one of the most significant challenges you have faced in your life? How did you handle it? What got you through it?

* Paul mentions “sufferings” for the sake of the Colossian believers. What kinds of sufferings do you recall from Scripture that Paul endured? Why do you think someone would be willing to endure hardship for the sake of Jesus/His people?

* In verse 26, Paul mentions “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.” What is the mystery? (Note: Ephesians 3:7-10 and Romans 16:25-27 also mention this idea)

* Why do you think Paul uses the words he does to describe his ministry? What words would you use to describe your ministry?

* Paul indicates that the goal of his ministry is to “present everyone mature in Christ.” What do you think a mature person in Christ might look like? Why aim for this?



* Verse 29 says, “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” How is it that God works his energy through our effort? How have you seen this work through you?



* Many Christians seem to gauge spiritual maturity based on the amount of biblical knowledge a person has. Is this a good indicator of spiritual maturity? Why or why not?

* Paul says that his message for developing maturity in others is proclaiming Jesus himself (“Him we proclaim,” verse 28). Why is it so important that we preach Jesus to one another constantly in our personal interactions with each other?

* Paul seems to be in anguish about helping the Colossians grow closer to Jesus. How serious are you about helping others grow towards maturity in Christ? Yourself?

Use this time together to pray for the person on your right. Pray for their pursuit of spiritual maturity. Pray also for your spiritual leaders: pastors, group leaders, parents, etc.



In this passage, Paul continues to describe the challenges of his ministry, but explains that his joy comes from hearing the believers are standing firm on the rock of Christ. Can you describe a time when your convictions were challenged by someone else? How did you deal with it? What was the outcome?



* As you look back over 1:24-2:5, what does Paul’s emotional state seem to be? Why?

* If you had to summarize verses 1-3, how would you describe Paul’s main objective?

* What kinds of things does Paul say are to be found “in Christ”?

* What do you think Paul means by saying he is “with [them] in spirit”?

* In verse 4, Paul makes it a point to warn the Colossians that false teaching may not appear so at first glance, but may seem reasonable & even persuasive. What kinds of ‘plausible arguments’ are you hearing these days? How might we handle these kinds of issues as thoughtful and faithful believers?

* Notice how many times in this passage Paul uses cognition-related words (know, understand, etc). Why is it so important that Christians work to be well-informed, both theologically, and culturally? What is one area where you need to grow in either theological or cultural understanding?

* It has been said that truth without love isn’t really truth, and love without truth isn’t really love. Which do you default to more, love or truth? What might it look like for Christians to weave these both together? Can you share an example of how you have seen this done well?

* What is one specific thing that you can do this week to help one other person in the room “be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ” (2:2-3)?

As you gather to pray this week, ask the Lord to help each of you walk more fully in both truth and love, standing firm in your faith, but with the compassion of Jesus. Pray for those you know who may be confused or have strayed from the faith because of ‘plausible’ but false teachings. Ask that they may come to a knowledge of the truth and be restored.



In this passage, Paul addresses maturity in Christ from the angle of applying the gospel and its benefits to our lives. Think back to your school days. Was there any subject matter you struggled with? Concepts you had difficulty applying? What finally made it ‘click’ for you?



* Verse 6 instructs believers to walk in Christ in the same way that they received Jesus. What do you think this means?

* In verses 11-12, Paul seems to connect the Old Testament rite of circumcision with the New Testament rite of baptism. What do you think he means by this?

* Verses 13-14 give us yet another “gospel nutshell,” where Paul describes what Jesus has done to save us. How would you describe our condition before and after being born again?

* Of the actions this passage describes God performing to save us, which is most meaningful to you?



* The point of verse 6 is that we should continue in the faith the same way we started: by grace, through faith. Why, then, do you think so many Christians seem to think that we’re saved by grace but that we grow through personal effort and disciplined rule-keeping?



* What does the phrase “rooted and built up” imply to you? Where do you feel you need to be more rooted? How can your community group help build you up in Christ?

* What are some “human traditions” that Christians are tempted to put confidence in rather than Jesus? What are the dangers associated with them?

* Read verses 13-15 again. How does it make you feel to know that God has won this decisive victory, through Christ, on your behalf?

In your time of prayer this week, spend a significant portion learning how to “abound in thanksgiving”. Take five minutes to make a list of as many things as you can think of to be thankful to God for. Then use that list to give the Lord thanks and honor for all he has done and continues to do.





In this passage, Paul sets up a contrast between what he calls “self-made religion” and true gospel-shaped faith in Jesus.

What was your perception of a “religious” person growing up? How has that perception changed as you’ve gotten older?



* Based on this passage, what would you say the religious climate was like in Colossae? Do you see any similarities to today in our own city?

* What does the text seem to indicate are the dangers in adhering so strictly to man-made rules and regulations? How have you found this to be true in your life?

* What do you think Paul means by these observances being a “shadow” which finds is substance in Christ?



* Paul says in verse 23 that human traditions have the “appearance of wisdom”, but in the end, are worthless. Why do you think so many people get caught up in clinging to these kinds of things?



* It seems that many Christians tend to either become “legalistic” or swing to the other extreme and become “licentious”. Which do you find yourself leaning toward more? Where do you think that comes from?

* What are some ways we can we strive together as a community toward a more gospel-focused lifestyle?

* Who do you know personally that seems to be caught up in religious rules or man-made traditions? How might you go about helping them see the futility of pursuing “shadows”?



This week, as you pray for each other, ask the Lord to reveal any places where you might unknowingly cling to “human precepts or teachings”. Ask Him to give you a deeper understanding and appreciation of the substance of the gospel, and to break any tendencies toward either legalism or license.





In this passage, Paul speaks specifically and practically about what maturity in Christ looks like. As you were growing, up, especially through your teen years, what did you find the most challenging about becoming an adult? How did you handle that transition?



* Notice how many times does Paul use the word “Christ” in this passage? Why do think this is significant for understanding the meaning of the passage?

* What do you think it means to “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (3:2)?

* In your own words, how would you summarize Paul’s main idea in this passage?

* What things does Paul say should be “put to death” or “put off”?



* Paul roots our practical living in deep theology (i.e. being raised with Christ, having our lives hidden with Christ, etc.). Nonetheless, many Christians view theology as unimportant. Why is theology important for practical Christian living?



* What are some earthly things that you tend to end up focusing on in an unhealthy or idolatrous way? (Note: Don’t generalize about things “we” struggle with—be specific about yourself)

* What do you think it looks like to “put to death” our sin? Why would you want to do that? What keeps you from taking sin this seriously?

* Puritan pastor Thomas Watson once said, “Until sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.” The opposite also seems true; until Christ becomes sweet, our sin will not become bitter. Can you think of some practical ways that a person could set his or her mind on Christ, making him sweeter and sin more bitter?



Break up into men and women this week and spend some time praying for each other about specific sins and areas of weakness you may be wrestling with. Pray that you will each truly set your minds on things above, and be renewed after the image of Jesus.



To complement last week’s passage about putting ‘off’ certain attitudes and practices, Paul now mentions attitudes and practices we should put ‘on’ in our pursuit of Christian maturity. As you reflect on your life over the last few years, what has been the most significant shift in your character you or others have noticed?



* What things Paul says we should “put on” are most compelling or convicting to you? Why?

* Why do you think Paul mentions we should forgive each other? (Note: see Matthew 18:21-35 for a similar concept)

* What is your understanding of the phrase, “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”?



* Verse 15 is key to this text. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” What keeps the peace of Christ from reigning in your heart? What are the implications of a heart that is not at peace?



* Rather than saying that we should change our lives in order to be acceptable before God, Paul says that we should change our lives because we’ve already been declared to be accepted by God. Why is this a significant difference?

* Christians often think about stopping bad habits (like those listed in verses 5-9), but sometimes forget about the need to begin godly habits (like those listed in verses 12-17). Why is it important to put off bad things AND put on godly things?

* Is there anybody that you are struggling to forgive? What will you do about it?

* The word “richly” (3:16) means “abundantly.” So, we should not just consider God’s word once in a while, but enough to make it an abundant part of our hearts and lives. How can you let the word of Christ dwell in you richly this week, and still maintain all the other responsibilities that God has given you?

Spend time together this week thanking the Lord for where He has brought you so far in your spiritual journey. Pray that you would each ‘put on’ the specific attributes that are needful, and that Christ’s peace would truly rule in your hearts.



This week’s passage describes how the gospel shapes our family and work relationships. What stood out most to you about the interaction of your parents/siblings growing up? What are you trying to repeat or not repeat in your family?



* Paul says that submission by wives should happen in a way that “is fitting in the Lord.” Why is it important?

* What does it mean for a husband to love his wife? What do you think Paul had in mind?

* Read Ephesians 5:22-30, a parallel passage to Colossians 3:18-19. What additional insight does this parallel passage provide?

* Why do you think Paul gives this parenting command to Fathers?

* How does the instruction of Colossians 4:1 demonstrate a difference between how Paul viewed first-century slavery and how we view colonial slavery of the 18th and 19th centuries?



* We live in a culture and time when most people don’t want to submit to anyone or anything. Why do you think we are, as 21st Century Americans, so resistant to authority?



* A large percentage of people today did not grow up with a healthy home life. What impact do you think this has on the way we relate to our family members? What do we need to learn in order to not repeat the same mistakes we experienced?

* The word translated “do not be harsh” in verse 19 means “to cause bitter feelings”. Why is this an appropriate warning for husbands?

* The word translated “discouraged” in verse 21 means, “to become disheartened to the extent of losing motivation”. Can you think of a time when you felt this way (as a child) or when you caused your children to feel this way? What happened and what can you learn from it?

* Verses 22-24 seem to be focused on the motivations behind work. What are some worldly motivations that Christians often adopt? How can we begin to think differently? What motivates *you* to work?



This week, break into separate men’s and women’s groups. Spend time praying for one other in regard to these three spheres: marriage (or relationship), family (children/parents) and vocation.



This passage deals with the issue of prayer for each other, and proclamation of the good news to others. Can you think of a time in which God answered a prayer of yours very specifically? What did that mean to you?



* Paul tells the Colossians to “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (4:2). What do you think it means to “be watchful”?

* Why do you think Paul wants the Colossians to pray for open doors for the word?

* In light of the surrounding context (4:2-6), what do you think is meant by “making the best use of the time”?

* Based on this passage, how does Paul view God’s role in his evangelistic ministry?



* Though most Christians know that prayer is an important part of fellowship with God, many still struggle to “continue steadfastly in prayer.” Why do you think this is? (*Note: look at both surface and root causes*)



* In what ways does continually praying for people who are not yet followers of Christ impact our ability to share Jesus with them? Does prayer make a difference?

* Paul talks about his need to speak the gospel clearly. In your own words, how would *you* clearly explain the gospel?

* People who go on short-term mission trips almost always come back energized and excited. In part, this is because they have been focusing on trying to “make the best use of the time (or every opportunity).” How can we have that kind of intentionality on a day-by-day basis?

* Most followers of Christ would like to make a bigger impact for the sake of God’s mission and want to do one (or more) of the following: 1) Develop more genuine friendships with non-Christians, 2) Be more intentional about sharing Christ with non-Christian friends, and 3) Be more ready to answer questions and objections. Which of these would you most like to grow in? What are a few *specific* things you can do to move that direction?



As you gather to pray, share the names of three people that you interact with on a regular basis that you would like to see God bring to faith in Christ? Spend time together praying for these people, and for each other as you seek to share the gospel with them.



In this last section of Colossians, we’ll look at the value of healthy Christian friendships. As you think back on your life, who have been a couple of your closest friends? What was one characteristic about them that stands out to you?



* In this passage, Paul lists not only a number of people, but something about most of them as well. What does this infer the value Paul placed on those friendships?

* What type of friend is Tychicus?

* In light of the influence of false teaching, why might Paul’s endorsement of Epaphras be especially important?

* In verse 16, Paul asks that this letter be read to the church at Laodecia. What does this tell you?



* What does Paul’s interaction with a team of Christians imply for you? For your Small Group?



* Which of the qualities Paul uses to describe his friends would you like people to say about you?

* How can your community group help foster those traits in each other?

* How has your love and respect for Jesus been challenged or grown during this study of Colossians?



As you take time to pray this week, thank God for the opportunity to spend time studying this letter together. Thank Him specifically for each member of the group, and the contribution they bring.