

COLOSSIANS

Central Focus Small Group Studies 2008

Study Notes by Lee Gatiss

Read Colossians (the whole book)

1. Write out the structure of the letter, and give each section a title (in your own words, not the headings in the Bible you're using!)
2. What are the repeated words or concepts which you think will be important as we study this letter? What are your initial thoughts on them?
3. Note down some things that puzzle you and will need further thought.
4. What have you read about in Colossians which strikes you as distinctive to this letter and you've not read anywhere else?

Read Colossians 1:1-14

1. Outline the structure of this passage and summarise what each section says in your own words.
2. What do verses 3-8 say about the gospel?
3. What effect does having real hope have on the church (verses 3-5)?
4. How is living in a worthy manner related to being filled with knowledge in verses 9-10?
5. Make a list of things to thank God for in this passage as a whole (especially verses 3-5 and 12-14), and then thank God for them.

Colossians 1:1-14 – Study notes

Paul and Timothy thank God for the powerful effect the gospel has had on the Colossians and pray that they would be filled with all its blessings, so that they will realise that same gospel is the key to a growing Christian life and want to grow in understanding it.

How this works out...

1-2 Dear brothers and sisters. This is a fairly standard greeting for a Christian letter. Note that Paul is an apostle by God's will not his own (see Gal 1:1 and Eph 1:1), and that Timothy is named as co-author of the letter (as in Phil 1:1, 1 Thess 1:1, Philemon). It is addressed to the saints (literally, "holy, set apart ones") which is a standard description for believers in the New Testament (Acts 9:13, Rom 1:7, Hebrews 6:10, Jude 1:3). As well as being a generalised expression of good will towards the recipients of the letter, grace and peace are loaded theological terms (e.g. see grace in verse 6, and peace in 3:15), especially when they come from God - the common heavenly Father of Paul, Timothy, and the Colossians, who has made "brothers" of Paul and Timothy (v.1) as well as the faithful in Colosse (v.2).

3-8 Thank God you heard the gospel! This section contains Paul and Timothy's thanksgiving to God for the powerful effect which the gospel has had on the Colossians. They are thankful for their faith, hope, and love (a trinity seen also in 1 Thess 1:3) which are signs of genuine conversion: they trust in Jesus, and they love his people because they have hope for the future (which they'll share, v. 12). This has come about because they heard and understood the gospel, the word of truth (see Eph 1:13), the word about the grace of God, which is having a fruitful effect on many around the world – they are not an isolated cult! They mention Epaphras, a Colossian himself (4:12), since he is the one who has brought news of the saints in Colosse. It seems likely that Paul did not have first-hand personal acquaintance with this church himself, but he rejoices to hear about what God has done in them through the gospel work of another man.

9 We pray you'd understand that gospel more. This section contains Paul and Timothy's prayer for the Colossian believers in the light of the gospel's initially fruitful effect on them. The key theme which holds both parts of this study together is understanding the powerful good news of what Jesus has done. "And so" is literally "because of this" or "for this reasons" (as in Eph 1:15), thus linking the prayer in 9-14 to the thanksgiving in 3-8. Their ceaseless prayer is that as the Colossians have begun well as Christians they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will, which will involve continuing to grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding. They already have some understanding and knowledge of the gospel (v. 6) and this prayer is for more of that. "His will" most probably refers not to some special personal insight into God's guidance for individual Christians but to what Paul calls in Ephesians "the mystery of God's will" or "the counsel of his will" (Eph 1:9-11), i.e. God's will which is found and expressed in the good news about Jesus. To be "filled" is, as we will see, a key concept for the Colossians (e.g. 2:9-10), so early on Paul shows that fullness comes from being given more and more insight into the same gospel which was responsible for our initial conversion, rather than moving on to something else.

10-11 So you will please God, grow, and stand firm. Being filled up with the knowledge of God's will, the gospel, has a certain purpose: it is "so as to walk in a manner worthy" and pleasing to the Lord - that is, God gives us deeper insight into the gospel because that enables us to please him more and more. We need to know the gospel if we want to please God. We can only please God when we understand the gospel which God has willed. Such a worthy, pleasing life is then described and unpacked using 4 participles (-ing words) in the original, which is slightly obscured by the ESV (which starts a new sentence in verse 11, for readability) but is much more accurately translated in the NIV. A life pleasing to God involves bearing fruit, increasing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened to joyfully endure, and giving thanks for our salvation. So, the logic goes, if we want to bear fruit in good works (just as the gospel itself is bearing fruit, verse 6) then we need to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, the gospel. We increase in our knowledge of God as we increasingly understand his will as shown in Jesus. It is that same gospel will which strengthens us with God's power (so much of which is required to enable us just to patiently and joyfully endure as Christians).

12-14 And go on praising him for what he's done in Christ. Finally, being filled with knowledge of God's will enables us to give thanks to God our Father for all he has done for us. These verses are a reminder of key aspects of the gospel itself, so tying the passage together. God has willed us to have a share in a glorious inheritance and has delivered us from darkness. The Father has decreed that we shall be transferred into his beloved son's hands and be granted forgiveness in him. This is his will, and it is good news for us. It is what gives us faith, hope, and love (v. 4-5), and as we grow in our understanding of it we will grow in good works, deepen our relationship with God, be fortified to persevere in a dark, Christ-hating world, and overflow with thankfulness to God himself for forgiveness and salvation.

Implications

*** The gospel from start to finish.** It is clear that the good news of what God has willed for us in Christ is what gets us going as Christians. We too should thank God for that beginning, in ourselves and in others. The key point being made in this passage as a whole is that the gospel also keeps us going and growing. What would it look like in practice to have left the gospel behind, as fit only for the start of our Christian lives? What would it look like in practice if we relished the prospect of deepening our grasp of the gospel and continuing to grow in it?

*** Connections in Paul's prayer.** Paul makes striking connections between truths which he wants us to appreciate. How would church be different if we were more hopeful about the future hope? What would a lack of such hope do to Central Focus groups? What difference would it make if we appreciated more that we need all God's glorious might simply to patiently endure trials and temptations as Christians? How does it make us feel to realise we need to keep growing in our understanding if we want to please God or be fruitful in good works for him?

*** The example of Paul's prayer.** Paul's prayer is a model of how to pray gospel-focused, God-centred prayers for ourselves and for others. It would be wrong to end this study without praying fervently for these things. The distinctive application of this passage will be seen most clearly in how it affects our prayer lives, and our prayer time as a group. Schedule in more time to pray this in: perhaps pray after studying v. 3-8, as well as at the end?

Read Colossians 1:15-23

1. Make a list of all the things verses 15-20 say about Jesus. He is...
2. Why does Paul mention all these things here? What's he trying to do?
3. What do verses 21-23 say about us?
4. Why does Paul mention these things here?
5. What do you make of the word "if" in verse 23?

Colossians 1:15-23 – Study notes

Paul expounds the supreme centrality of Christ in creation and reconciliation in order to inspire thanksgiving, lift our eyes above the mundane, and spur us on to persevering faith in the gospel.

How this works out...

15-17 Supreme in creation. Who is the beloved Son into whose kingdom we have been transferred (v.14)? Mention of Christ at the end of the previous section launches Paul into a passionate exposition of who Jesus truly is. The Colossians' sights are raised: just as the gospel they believed is not merely a local phenomenon but a global force to be reckoned with (1:5-6) so also Christ is not just Lord of their little church but the most supremely important person in all creation. He is the perfect, visible image of God, the one who makes God known to us (John 1:18). He is the firstborn over creation – which doesn't mean that he is a created being (who didn't exist at first but then one day was born) but that he is (as Psalm 89:27) puts it "the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth" with the rights and privileges of God's heir, as it were. He wasn't made, he made – that is, he isn't a created being but the one who created. He has that supreme status of 'firstborn' because he made everything – things we can see, things we can't, things which the Colossians may be tempted to worship (see 2:18) or fear because of their power (2:15). All these were made by him and for him – their true purpose in existence is to serve him, who existed before them all and who sustains them every second of every day. Amazingly, even as he hung on a cross dying at the hands of sinners, the whole world still revolved around and relied on this man!

18-20 Supreme in reconciliation. As verses 15-17 focus on Christ as supreme over creation, so these verses focus on his supremacy over the church, the new creation (as it were) of those in heaven and earth who are reconciled to God by the cross. He has a close personal relationship to his people as their head, their life-giving ruler. He is not only firstborn over all creation (15) but the firstborn from the dead – the first human to come back from the dead to head up the new resurrection order; firstborn here has more of the sense of 'first of many', as in firstfruits (see 1 Corinthians 15:20-23). He is pre-eminent over both old and new creations because all the fullness of God is in him (we'll see more of this in 2:9-10) and because it is only through him that reconciliation is achieved. Reconciliation and peace is brought to the new creation / resurrection world because of the blood of Christ shed on the cross. It is freely embraced by his people, but will be triumphantly imposed on the persistently rebellious (see 2:15, 3:6). So, he is pre-eminent because of his divinity and because of his death. The need for and purpose of his death is then explained in the next section.

21-23 The reconciled will be holy if they persevere in the gospel. Attention moves from Christ to us - our alienation, reconciliation, ultimate purpose, and present imperative. Paul reminds them first that they used to be alienated from Christ and mentally hostile to him, rejecting his claims on them (as creator and king) and therefore behaving in a way that could be described as evil. This would be a perilous situation to remain in, given the supremacy of Christ over everything. Yet as part of Jesus' reconciliation plan (20) they have been reconciled to God by Christ's physical death. This has the ultimate purpose and goal of transforming their alienation and evil into a relationship "before him" and a holy, blameless life. That is the glorious future which Christ died to achieve (see Ephesians 5:25-27) and which we see in part now as we grow in holiness. Verse 23 encourages them, however, that their present perseverance is the path to that future hope: they must continue in faith and not move away from the gospel they've heard proclaimed by Paul and Epaphras, as opposed to other false versions which promise progress in other ways.

Implications

* **Praise our supreme king.** Since verses 15-20 come out of the thanksgiving of verses 12-14, we are being encouraged here to praise Christ. First we praise him for who he truly is - bigger and more glorious and central to the universe than perhaps we ever dreamed. Take time to pray in and meditate on the greatness of Christ, rejoicing that we are part of the kingdom of such a magnificent and pre-eminent king.

* **Praise our saviour king.** We learn much about God's plan to save us here, which should provoke thanksgiving and rejoicing. It revolves around Christ, who rescues those who are hostile to him and in the domain of darkness by means of his bloody physical death on a cross which reconciles us to him, brings forgiveness of sins, and ends with us being transformed from evil doers into those who are holy.

* **Lifting our sights.** In a sense, this passage answers Paul's own prayer in 1:9 that they would know more of God's will, by actually expounding what God has done in and through Christ. He does this with a view to raising our sights above the mundane things of our lives to see a bigger picture, and inspire wholehearted, fruit-bearing, joyful living. Christ is "my Jesus, my Saviour" but there is also none like him - the supreme Lord, centre, and goal of the universe. This is a reassurance in difficult times – Christ is supreme over all troubles. It can bring focus and purpose to everyday discipleship as we bring our lives into harmony with his cosmic plan. It also motivates us to holiness - that is the endpoint of all Christ's work for us, that we would be holy.

* **Standing firm in the gospel.** The "if" in verse 23 reminds us that salvation is not about floating up to heaven on flowery beds of ease or being "once saved always saved" in a complacent and careless way. Yes, from an eternal perspective God chose us, sent Christ to die for us, and will keep us until the end. If we are truly saved we will share that inheritance (1:12) as God intended and purposed from all eternity. But from a human perspective, we need the

daily encouragement of “if indeed you continue in the faith...” to spur us on in God-empowered endurance (1:11). We must not allow ourselves to be deflected or distracted from that gospel stability. Have we begun to drift and take our salvation for granted, forgetting that present perseverance is the path to that future hope? Have we moved away from the gospel we heard, into more esoteric concerns?

Read Colossians 1:24 - 2:5

1. This section is all about Paul (note the repeated "I rejoice... I want you to know... I say this...") From this passage, write out a job description for the apostle Paul i.e. what is his place, his role, his responsibility, his concern?
2. How does Paul's 'job' relate to God/Christ?
3. So why do you think he changes from talking about Jesus in the last study to talking about himself all of a sudden?
4. Verse 24 can be puzzling. What do you think it means? What can it not mean?
5. If we made full use of Paul's ministry to us through his letters, what (thinking of this passage particularly) would be the effect for us?

Colossians 1:24 – 2:5 – Study notes

Paul expounds his own place in God's plan and purposes as a suffering servant of Christ for the sake of the church so that they will make use of his ministry for their maturity and safety.

How this works out...

24 Suffering servant. Paul is happy to suffer for the Colossians and indeed for the whole church of Christ wherever it may be found. He will explain why he is delighted to suffer for their sake in the next few verses. His suffering comes as a result of his ministry to the gentiles and is for their sake. He says that his sufferings "fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions", which has caused many people some puzzlement. He clearly cannot mean that what Christ suffered for us on the cross was insufficient to pay the price for our sins and that he (and perhaps we) must add more suffering to truly get us to glory. That would contradict the clear teaching of the rest of the New Testament that the cross is utterly sufficient (see also Colossians 2:13-15 on Christ's total victory). It is not an easy verse to unpack but the best explanation seems to be that there is a certain amount of suffering for God's people to experience in the time between Christ's ascension and second coming. Since they are Christ's body, their sufferings can be said to be "the afflictions of Christ". This chimes in with what Jesus said to Paul when they first met – "Saul, why are you persecuting me" (when he was in fact persecuting the church, Acts 9:4) and with the idea in Revelation 6:9-11 of a set amount of suffering to be experienced by the church before the very end comes. So, by suffering as part of his ministry, Paul saw himself as taking up a big quota of those end-time sufferings, hoping perhaps that this would save the church from having to endure more of it. This is not easy for us to grasp, and it may be wise not to spend too much time on this one clause or we will miss the clearer parts of the passage.

25-27 Mysterious ministry. Paul was appointed by God to be a minister/servant with the job of making God's word or message fully known. That message was a mystery for many generations but has now been revealed to God's saints (holy ones, set apart ones, as in 1:2). The mystery is that Christ is in "you", that is, the Colossian gentile Christian believers - a new thing in God's plan which was anticipated earlier but only fulfilled with the coming of Jesus, who brings the hope of glory (heaven) to gentiles (see also Eph 3:4-6). It is no longer a mystery, because Paul's job is to publicly proclaim it. It's such good news that Paul doesn't mind suffering for it.

28-29 Universal proclamation. The centre and subject of Paul's proclamation is the Christ who dwells in the Colossians. Proclaiming him warns and teaches everyone so that they can all be presented mature in Christ (note the repeated all and everyone which stresses that no-one, Jew or Gentile, slave or free (see 3:11) should be missed out). Maturity, perfection, being what we were designed to be in Christ is the goal of Paul's ministry, achieved by presenting Jesus to people. This is not an easy task – he struggles with it. But he struggles with the aid of God's energy powerfully enabling him to carry out this ministry.

2:1-3 Paul's Struggle. Having mentioned the struggle in 1:29 he continues with that theme here. He does not want to pretend that his ministry (or any Christian ministry) is easy, but is open about the difficulties and struggles. Here he particularly draws attention to the fact that he is working for those he has never met personally – those at nearby Laodicea (see 4:15-16 and Revelation 3:14-22) as well as the Colossians. His hope is that they will be encouraged when they understand the mystery of the gospel and why he's suffering (rather than discouraged by Paul's imprisonment, 4:18). See also Eph 3:13). He also wants them to be "knit together in love" as Christians and as churches, which should be the unifying result of properly appreciating his teaching. Everything they could want or need in terms of sure and certain knowledge about God's plan is found in the Christ Paul teaches. Indeed, in him are "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge", which explains why Paul is so keen to proclaim him and him alone.

2:4-5 Plausible delusion. In a small hint of what is to come, Paul mentions that he is saying these lofty things about Christ as the fountain of all good things because there are others around who might delude or deceive them. He is concerned that they not be led astray by plausible arguments but are instead rooted in Christ. But in the face of such a threat he rejoices in their firm faith and good order – which implies that they have not yet completely fallen for the delusions of false teaching which may be around.

Implications

*** Make use of Paul.** Paul had a very particular and unique role in God's plan as the apostle to the gentiles. As a predominantly gentile church then, we can say he is our apostle. He suffered and struggled hard to minister the gospel and leave us letters like Colossians. Chapter 2 verse 2 here shows us that if we make use of his ministry we will be encouraged, knit together in love, and be able to plumb the depths of the riches we have in Christ. Not that we don't have those things elsewhere in the Bible, but this was Paul's particular stewardship from God for us. Do we make use of and appreciate this gift from God as much as we could? What would we miss out on if we did not?

*** Proclaim Christ.** Although Paul's ministry was unique as an apostle, he is also a model for us to follow in other respects. His pattern of ministry as seen here, particularly in 1:28-29 is highly instructive, which is why St. Helen's and other churches have adopted verse 28 as a neat summary of their purpose and aim. The aim of all our ministry is to proclaim Christ. We do it through wise teaching and warning. We don't limit who we speak to (it is for all). Our goal is mature discipleship, not just initial repentance and faith. We don't do it in our own strength but praying for

God's. We will struggle and suffer for Christ and his people. Do we measure up to this, our aim as a church? Where might we need to be warned and challenged by Paul's example?

* **The Plausible Delusion.** If you have time, do consider 2:4 more carefully, which is about how Paul's ministry can keep them safe as Christians. What other models of ministry might there be? How do they differ from what Paul has set out here? What do they say about Christ? Why are they so plausible? Why deluded?

Read Colossians 2:6-15

Blankety-Blank! Complete these sentences with your gut reactions:

I think I will be a more fulfilled and complete Christian if I...

I will be marked out as a more deeply devoted Christian if I...

God will forgive me if...

I will be successful in my Christian life if I...

If I want to really be an insider at St. Helen's I need to...

2. What repeated words or phrases can you see in Colossians 2:6-15?

3. Summarise in a sentence what each part of this passage is about.

Verses 6-7

Verse 8

Verses 9-10

Verses 11-12

Verses 13-15

4. Paying particular attention to the words that connect each of these units together (e.g. "Therefore", "For", "And" etc, can you summarise in a sentence what the whole passage is saying?

5. How does Colossians 2:6-15 address the questions in Question 1 above?

completeness
marks of devotion
forgiveness
success and triumph
being an insider

Colossians 2:6-15 – Study notes

Paul urges them to carry on as they began because united to Christ, the supreme power, they have everything they need as Christians – despite what some may say.

How this works out...

6-7 Walk this way. Given who Christ is (1:15-23) and Paul's role as his servant (1:24-2:5), he urges them now to keep walking in Christ (that is, living with reference to him). They are not to do this by following any new innovative teaching, but "as you received Jesus as Lord" and "just as you were taught". They should carry on as they began. Growth and progress as a Christian involves not moving on from Christ but being rooted and built up in him, and overflowing more and more with gratitude for all he is and has done.

8 Don't be kidnapped! Having already said in 2:3-4 that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ but that some may try to delude them and distract them from this, Paul again warns them about alternatives to Christ – not different religions, but different ways of growing and progressing as a Christian. He describes the alternatives as "philosophy and empty deceit". He is not saying that philosophy is inherently an evil subject to study in the sense that it encourages careful and rigorous thought (which things are good and wholesome for those who seek to serve God with all their heart, soul, and mind). Rather, he is saying that some philosophies are designed to capture and deceive (more reason why we should be careful and rigorous thinkers!). The deception comes from trying to base progress as Christians on merely human tradition, or the elemental spirits of the world (that is, supposedly spiritual principles which are actually worldly in orientation, or even demonic in their origin), rather than on a deepening appreciation / appropriation of Christ.

9-10 You are full. We will see more of what the deceptive philosophies and human traditions are in 2:16-23. But here Paul gives us the positive reasons why we ought not to be taken in by such schemes. Rather than bash the false teaching first, his pastoral and theological method is to take us immediately back to Christ because all heresies and dodgy spiritualities start with a faulty view of him. Verse 9 affirms the full deity (complete God-ness) of Christ. Verse 10 links us to him, so just as Jesus is full of God, so we are full of Jesus – not "can be full" if we follow a certain regime, or "will be full" if we persevere long and hard enough, or can fill ourselves by doing certain things, but "have been filled". The stress on him as head of all rule and authority shows that we therefore have direct access to the ruler of all things, and do not need the elemental spirits (see verse 8 and verse 15 and the ESV footnote for these as demonic rulers and authorities) to intercede for us or lead us in any way. The double reference to fullness and filling here might suggest that the deceptive philosophy Paul is warning against was keen on the vocabulary of fullness (something we all, rightly, desire) but was teaching incorrectly about it.

11-12 You are marked. We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that circumcision was a knotty issue for the early church (see Acts 15:1-5 and Galatians 5:1-6) with some insisting on it as necessary for all Christians. Here Paul insists that all Christians have already been circumcised spiritually ("without hands") by virtue of their being in Christ, who was himself circumcised both literally (on the eighth day, Luke 2:21) and metaphorically (by putting off his physical body in death, see also 1:22). We were spiritually circumcised in Christ when we were buried with him in baptism. Note the link between the physical signs of circumcision and baptism here, and the equivalent spiritual realities they signified. As believers they have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection, and their baptism was a picture of that. They do not need anything else to mark them out. Being literally circumcised (as, perhaps, some urged them to be) would add nothing to what they already had in Christ, or take them further, deeper, higher. Faith in God's power to raise the dead is all they need.

13-15 You are alive, forgiven, and triumphant. What God did for Jesus in verse 12 (he died and was raised) he also does for us who are united to him. This means that being dead in our sins God makes us alive with Christ by forgiving our sins. Our sin is seen as building up an un-payable debt we owe to God. On the cross, Christ pays for us (i.e. the Father nails the record of debt to the cross where Jesus dies) and thus the demand for repayment is set aside. This in turn disarms the demonic powers who may seek to direct and control our lives away from Christ (see verse 8), because they no longer have anything to use against us or put in the way of our relationship to God. Thus the cross is a victory over the powers of evil because it secures our forgiveness. Christ has triumphed and we have triumphed in him. So no-one else can have authority over us. They may point to our sins and accuse us (making us feel guilty) or demand justice against our transgressions, but our sin has been dealt with and so their power over us is reduced to nothing. This is a very distinctive and almost unique passage in the New Testament about Christ's victory, and well worth lingering on (see also 1 John 3:8, Rev 12:11a).

Implications

*** Stand still to grow.** This passage is all about how we continue, grow, and make progress as Christians. We grow by standing still – not moving on from Christ to some human traditions or spiritual ladder-climbing, but by putting down roots into Christ and being built up in him. That means understanding and appreciating more of who Christ is and what he has done for us. It is vital to grasp the principle that progress in the Christian life is not so much about looking inwards at ourselves or learning techniques but about seeing Christ more clearly.

*** Rejoice in union.** A key part of growing as a Christian is to grasp that we are united to Christ. Note the repeated emphasis throughout this passage on our being "in him" or one with him in something he has experienced – verses 6,

7, 10, 11, 12, 13. This is the link between the salvation Christ accomplished for us and the salvation he applies to us. In other words, it is the key to application. Learning more about Christ is not merely something "out there"; it connects with us because we are united to him. So, is he full of God? Then in him we are filled and need nothing more to be complete. Has he defeated the powers of evil? Then in him I need no longer fear or follow them. Am I "in him" by faith? Then it doesn't matter whether I am "in" anywhere else.

* **Next week..** The next study is intimately related to this one, and fleshes out what some of the human philosophies and demonic deceits threatening the Colossians actually are. So we can talk more generally in this study about Christ and about principles for combating error, rather than looking too closely at modern equivalents of "the Colossians heresy". We'll get to that...!

Read Colossians 2:16-23

1. How would you sum up the main point of what Paul's been saying so far?

2. How does Colossians so far teach us to answer these questions?
 - a. I will be a more fulfilled and complete Christian if I...
I will be marked out as a more devoted Christian if I...
God will forgive me if...
I will triumph as a Christian if I...
I will be an insider in the church if I...
3. There were alternative answers to such questions floating around in Colosse. From 2:6-23, can you pick out what they might have been?

4. Why are the false answers Paul mentions in 2:16-23 said to be wrong?

5. Paul is not just warning us against falling for those wrong answers though. What is his main application (hint: see the start of verse 16 and verse 18)?

6. How do/might we in the church today pass judgment on each other or disqualify each other in this sort of way?

Colossians 2:16-23 – Study notes

Paul exhorts them not to allow seemingly plausible false methods of growing as a Christian to dictate the way they live for Jesus, in whom they already have everything they need.

How this works out...

16-17 Don't let them judge you. The "therefore" links this passage very closely with 2:6-15 and means that the prohibitions here ("let no one... let no one...") are based on the truths we learned in the previous passage, i.e. it is precisely because we have everything we need in Jesus (2:9-15) that we are not to let others pass judgment on us. Note that Paul does not simply tell the Colossians to avoid food laws, festivals, and Sabbath keeping. Nor does he tell them merely to not pass judgment on others because of their views on such things. He commands them not to allow other people to make them feel guilty or second class because they don't have the same opinions about such things. We cannot literally stop people passing judgments (being judgmental) about us, but we should make sure that what they think does not faze us or deflect us from the truth. The particular reason questions of food laws and special days should not be allowed to function this way is that they are merely pointers which (in the Old Testament) anticipated the coming of Christ (e.g. he is the one who truly will bring a Sabbath rest for the people of God). Now that Christ – the glorious substance of the promises – has come, there is no need to continue playing in the shadows with mere models. Everything that was promised and signified in those ceremonial regulations is now theirs in Christ (2:9-10). It may sound plausible (2:4) to insist that people keep such laws but to do so would be to miss something crucially important about the new age that has come in Christ.

18-19 Don't let them disqualify you. Paul repeats his prohibition "let no one...". This time they are not to let others disqualify them, presumably from membership of the church. The Father has qualified us to share in an inheritance (1:12 – a different word for qualify, but the concept is certainly related) so no-one else has the right to pretend they are the referees and can include or exclude us from his family. Some were, it seems, insisting on certain experiences and attitudes to the Christian life as the basis for someone's inclusion. They insisted on asceticism – the word literally here is 'humility' (as in 3:12) but seems to be used (as in 2:23 and elsewhere in Greek) in the negative sense of false humility – overtly debasing oneself, denying oneself, or abstaining from something unnecessarily. They insist on the worship of angels – not worshipping angels, but worshipping God in an angelic way ("angelic worship" is an alternative way of translating this). This is possibly linked to things like singing or speaking in tongues (see 1 Corinthians 13:1) which might be considered a more spiritual way to worship God and 'be in his direct presence.'

Those attempting to disqualify authentic Christians in Colosse may also go on in detail about visions they have had, but Paul sees through this façade of piety and spirituality, exposing the puffed up sensuous attitude of such a person. Ironically he links asceticism (denying oneself pleasures) to sensuality (the love of pleasurable experiences) – they love being ever so humble and spiritual! Yet they have no real cause to be proud of this. Such people should not be allowed to dictate the Christian culture at Colosse and make others feel they have less than a full relationship with Christ because they are without such experiences. We already have fullness in Christ (2:9-10). These self-appointed referees are following their own rules rather than holding on to Christ, the Head, who is the one to bring true growth to the body (the church) as it is joined together in him (rather than divided by petty man-made differences). Note that the stress here is on true growth that is from God – not growth the plausible but human way.

20-23 Why submit to their rules? Paul switches from prohibitions to a loaded question, as a way of exposing a false approach to Christian growth. He asks them why they submit to ascetic regulations and rules which ban them from certain physical things (do not handle, taste, touch). This seems to indicate that they have perhaps begun to take such regulations seriously, even if they haven't committed themselves wholesale to the false teachers' heretical ways. The problem with such regulations is that they are based on human precepts and teachings but they have actually put these things behind them now, having been united with Christ in his death. Clearly, being united with Christ in his death is not compatible with living according to the ways of the world (since it was his refusal to keep such human traditions which so angered those who had him crucified). Again, it may sound plausible (2:4) to insist on such things since they look wise and seem to make people appear religious. It sounds sensible to insist on severity in the name of preventing over-indulgence. But Paul's final reason for avoiding such methods is devastating – they don't actually work anyway!

Implications

*** Let's not judge or be judged re: observances.** How do we as a church or as individuals "pass judgement" on people in regard to their religious observances? How can the culture or subculture of a group make us feel that we are being looked down on for something we do or don't do as Christians? In previous generations, some would insist that Christians should not drink, smoke, or go to the cinema. This may sound strange to us now, but do we have our own taboos which are equally unbiblical? There is a fine line on some issues – it is of course wrong for Christians to get drunk (Ephesians 5:18) so some things about what we drink, for instance, are right to be clear on. But must Christians always have a quiet time, attend a small group, homeschool their kids, serve on a summer camp, wear pink pyjamas or (insert favourite shibboleth here) in order to be accepted by us? And are we insecure in Christ, so that we think we must do these things to be accepted by him and others?

* **Let's not disqualify or be disqualified re: experiences.** In the same way, talking in a particular way about religious experiences can also alienate people in church. We may not insist on angelic worship or rave about our recent 40 days of fasting in the desert, but do we feel that other ascetic or 'spiritual' experiences are considered necessary in order to be in the "in crowd" at St. Helen's? What are they, and is it right to feel that?

* **Let's not submit to toothless rules.** We will see next week the way to be godly in Christ, but simply keeping human rules and regulations is clearly not it. What seemingly wise, self-made religious rules are we in danger of elevating to the status of divine commands? Do they actually stop us wanting to sin? What will...?

Read Colossians 3:1-11

1. Fill in this table to work out the key idea in verses 1-4. What is said about Christ and what is said about me? What is the link?

Christ	Me

2. What am I therefore to do according to verses 1-4, if I want to grow as a Christian with a growth that is from God? How do I do that?

3. What is so bad about the things in verse 5? Do we think the same way Paul does about them?

4. Do the sins in verses 8-9 have anything in common? What is different about each?

5. What are the links between verses 1-10 and verse 11?

6. How is this teaching different to the ways of growth being presented by the false teachers in Colosse (seen in 2:16-23)?

Colossians 3:1-11 – Study notes

Paul exhorts them to focus on their union with Christ in his death, resurrection, and future glory as the motivation for struggling with sin and being changed within a new community.

How this works out...

1-4 Look to where your life is. The question after the last study might be, 'how then should I grow as a Christian?' Paul does not want to leave us thinking that the Christian life is static, but he doesn't want us focusing on externals. It is about looking to Christ, to whom we are united (through faith, 2:12). He died, was raised, and will appear in glory. So will we, if we are in/with him. To grow as a Christian we must focus on Christ in heaven, hold fast to him (see 2:19), and seek what is above, rather than earthly desires.

5-6 Kill what is deathly for you. Paul warns us to remember the consequences of base desires which we all still have. God's wrath is coming precisely because of such things as sexual immorality, evil desire, and greed (covetousness). God hates such things and will judge them because they are essentially anti-God. That is what idolatry means – the service of other gods. So rather than be part of the judgment, we are to strangle, smother, crucify, kill those things in our lives, focusing on the fact that Christ died for such sins.

7-8 Walk away from bad-mouthing. Paul reminds us that we used to walk in such sins but now (now that Christ has come, now that we are united to him in his new life and looking forward to his return in glory) we must put them away and not walk in them. The sins he lists are not this time (as in verse 5) sins of heart and desire primarily, but sins which find expression through the mouth – angry, bitter, untruthful, unedifying words. God cares more about these than about the apparently religious observances of 2:16.

9-10 Don't go back to the old ways. There is no conjunction (and, but, therefore) to link verse 9 to verse 8, so it is a new thought even if it is related to the previous verses. The idea of truth was not absent in the previous verse - slander is saying something untruthful about a person. But now we have a command not to lie, motivated by the fact that lying is part of our old nature which has died (verse 3, "you have died"). Lying is therefore incompatible with our new self. The goal of its renewal is eventually to make us like God, the creator of our new selves, i.e. we do not remake ourselves but it is something done to us as we walk in the way prescribed. We must not go back to our old ways, but keep our eyes on the Christ who is renewing us internally to be like him.

11 Christ is all and in all. In this new state ("here"), which now exists for us because of Christ's death and resurrection, certain barriers and labels are torn down. The context is about edifying speech between members of a community, so the link to community relations is not unnatural. It is talking about the essential unity of the church regardless of human distinctions between people. So there would have been ethnic Jews and Greeks in Colosse but now their ethnicity did not matter so much as their union with Christ. There were slaves and freemen, but class or socio-economic differences were no longer of primary concern. There were even perhaps barbarians and Scythians - uncivilised, working-class folks (Scythians were from the Black Sea area, and were thought of as perhaps the most uncouth of barbarians). But what matters now is not people's status, education, or manners but that they are united with Christ in his death, resurrection, and future glory. If one is not disqualified because of a lack of certain experiences (2:18) then neither did any of these human distinctions matter anymore either when it came to membership of the church of Jesus Christ. Christ is all and in all, not universally (everyone in the world) but in terms of the context here he indwells all who are united to him, and he is everything (all) to them. The only thing that matters is relating to him. This verse is similar to Galatians 3:27-28 but please note that Colossians does not mention "male and female", so potentially divisive discussions about gender roles are for another time...

Implications

*** Union with Christ is the key to application.** We must note again (see 2:6-15) that our being united with Christ is the link between salvation accomplished for us and salvation applied to us. Learning more about Christ is not merely something "out there"; it connects with us because we are united to him. He died, was raised, and will appear in glory. So will we, if we are in him. This is reiterated as the principle of growth, opposed to the alternatives seen in 2:16-23. We grow by appreciating and appropriating our union with Christ rather than through external rituals or conformity to humanly devised patterns of religion.

*** Sin will be judged – don't die with it.** Paul's reminder that God's wrath will be poured out on selfish desires motives us to put away such things. If we died with Christ then the punishment due to us for our sin has been taken, by him, on the cross. Yet Paul reminds us of the incompatibility of continuing to live in, wallow in, and pander to earthly sins. They are essentially anti-God, so we must not cuddle up to them. Do we treat such sins as covetousness with that level of contempt and bluntness in our lives? Or do we downplay the seriousness of sexual immorality and impurity because, well, everybody is doing it and who will notice...?

*** Something has changed – live with it.** The essence of verses 7-11 is that something has now changed with the coming of Christ and our union with him, so we should change too. So our walking should change, and our spiritual clothing has changed and should change as it is progressively renewed. Is our attitude to the sins in verse 8 different

now to how it was before we became Christians (if we can remember such a time)? Has our attitude to truth changed too (verse 9) or do we still see lies, gossip, slander, and 'put downs' as acceptable?

*** Christ in all.** In Christ our natural community has also changed. We now have a closer bond with all Christians, whatever their race, class, or educational background than we do with our natural born communities. How should this show itself within the life of a church? What would it look like if we still held on (sinfully) to some aspects of these divisions within a church like St. Helen's? How could we be better at expressing our unity in Christ across such barriers of education, culture, and nationality (individually and as a church)?

Read Colossians 3:12-4:1

1. What is the link between verse 12 and what has come before?
2. Why are the qualities listed in verses 12-14 such a good contrast with the sins of verses 5 and 8?
3. What does it mean to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts? (verse 15)
4. How are we to let the word of Christ dwell in us? (verse 16)
5. Why does Paul include the commands of 3:18-4:1? That is, how does it fit with what he has been saying so far in this letter, and this passage?
6. Think about the relationships from verses 18 onwards which you struggle with most. How could verses 12-14 help us with these?

Colossians 3:12-4:1 – Study notes

Paul exhorts them as God's family to live as such in all their relationships, with constant reference to others and to the Lord Jesus so that they will enjoy his peace.

How this works out...

12-14 What do God's children wear? In verses 9-10 we were introduced to the idea of putting off the old self and putting on the new self, as something which has already happened to us in Christ. Here, verse 12 takes up the same image and applies it in terms of our ongoing life of walking with Christ. This is still part of the overall thrust of chapter 3 which goes back to verses 1-4 and how we seek the things that are above where Christ is. Part of setting our minds on those things is to put on certain virtues, which are appropriate for God's chosen children. When we realise who we are, that shows us how we should live (i.e. like our Father). In keeping with the corporate nature of the applications since verse 9, here we have more "one another" commands for the church.

15 The Peace of Christ. This verse is more a summary of what has gone before than a new command. Humility, patience, forgiveness, and love all involve serving others rather than self. By living this way, peace is fostered in the community of God's people, which can be described as "the peace of Christ" because Christ himself came not to be served but to serve others. We were called to such peace with one another, as part of a united body of Christ (see also 1:24). The apostle adds thankfulness here because lack of gratitude is the opposite of the virtues in 12-14, and springs from a different motivation. For the idea of peace 'ruling', think of the Pax Romana (the peace of Rome), a long period of relative peace in the 1st and 2nd centuries under Roman rule. The concept of peace with God (Romans 5:1) is not absent from Colossians (see "reconciled" in 1:22) but here the idea is of peace with each other.

16-17 The Word of Christ. Paul now refers to the instrument by which Christ rules: his word. This is almost personified and they are encouraged to allow it to dwell within the Colossian church in many and various ways (richly). By doing so, peace will rule. One way in which the word dwells within the congregation is through teaching and admonishing one another using the word. Grammatically, it is probably better here to see singing as one way in which we teach and admonish one another (i.e. we teach and admonish each other by means of our singing psalms etc), just as Ephesians 5:19 also encourages us to speak to one another by means of psalms. That is not to say that teaching and admonishing cannot be done without melodic accompaniment, of course: see e.g. 1:28, and also "admonish the idle" in 1 Thess 5:14. Again, thankfulness is mentioned twice here, since one way gratitude in our hearts to God is expressed is through our singing. Our singing will be lacklustre if we are not gripped by the word, with thankful hearts.

18-19 Marriage. Paul turns from general applications to some specific ways in which we can let the word and peace of Christ rule in our everyday lives. The first two verses address the primary unit of every family – husband and wife – with reciprocal obligations (unusual for the ancient world, where wifely submission may have been encouraged but sacrificial husbandly love was not).

20-21 Family. As in the Ten Commandments (see Eph 6:1-3), children are to obey their parents "in everything". This cannot, of course, mean doing something sinful because the service rendered here is said to please the Lord (which sin can never do). Fathers (or "parents" more broadly) also have reciprocal obligations to their children – not to exasperate or provoke them to discouragement. Note again how each side in the relationship is to consider the other's needs and be focused on them in love (3:12-13).

3:22-4:1 Work. 1st century slavery was not exactly like 19th century slavery, though both were far from satisfactory. Colossian slaves would not all be in chains or employed with hard labour, but could be well looked after and in responsible positions of management and administration. Even so they were to give satisfaction to their earthly masters, knowing that they had a heavenly one who was always watching them. Jesus is not against industry and hard work, and will indeed reward diligence on the day of judgment. Paul reminds slaves that that day is also a day of reckoning, when laziness and wrongdoing (stealing from one's master, for example) would be brought to light. For the same idea of a day of reward or reckoning for Christians (which does not affect our salvation as such) see 2 Corinthians 5:10. Masters in the Colossian church must be just and fair, especially as Christians with a master in heaven to consider themselves. This is "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" applied to the workplace.

Implications

* **Are we peaceful?** How would a church which had very little of the virtues in verses 12-14 look? Where are we struggling to be a church ruled by the peace of Christ? What is the antidote?

* **Teaching each other.** Verse 16 shows that we do not rely only on the pulpit or the small group for our teaching. The word is to dwell in us richly, in many ways, with all wisdom. So we are also to teach and admonish one another. How can we do this more, without pretending to be preachy know-it-alls?

* **Singing to each other.** Our congregational singing should not only be addressed 'vertically' to God but should also have a 'horizontal' aspect. Do we consider this aspect of our singing in church? How should it affect the way we

engage with the songs on the service sheet? It is said that we learn much of our theology (our worldview generally, in fact) from the songs we sing. Do we pray as much for those who put together and lead our services as we do for the preachers? Our singing can be improved not just with musical skill, but primarily with a greater appreciation of the word of Christ which motivates and inspires our hearts to sing. But what other songs fill our minds during the day, and what are they teaching us about the world?

* **The word in relationships.** It is important to spend some time in this study thinking about the application of 3:18-4:1, not just about how they fit into the passage. Perhaps discussing which parts each of us finds most difficult to obey is the way into a discussion of this. It might also be fruitful to consider how the corporate virtues in 3:12-14 might be applied to these specific relationships, and what that might look like in practice.

Read Colossians 4:2-18

1. What does Paul teach us about prayer in verses 2-4? (your own words!)

2. What does Paul say about relating to those who are not Christians in verses 2-6?

List the people Paul mentions in verses 7-18 and what he says about who each one is.

4. Why include this section in the letter? How does it fit in? Why study it?

5. What is the main message you will take away from Colossians?

6. Which verse in the letter could you memorize and "store up in your heart"? (Psalm 119:11)

Colossians 4:2-18 – Study notes

Paul finishes his letter with a prayer request, evangelistic advice, and final greetings and instructions which encourage them to keep going with Christ, in partnership with the wider church (especially Paul's mission).

How this works out...

2-4 Prayer requests. Paul continues to help us understand what it means to set our minds on things above and to long for glory (3:1-4). He tells them to continue in prayer without being distracted. Being watchful could mean being alert, attentive, and awake (as in Matt 26:40) but could also have reference to the second coming (as in Matt 25:13). If the latter is in view, then this would fit well with 3:4. Prayer should also be full of thanksgiving (see 3:15, 16, 17). Paul asks for prayer for him and Timothy ("us", see 1:1) in their evangelistic mission. He prays for God to do his part (that is, create opportunities and awaken people) and for him to do his (to declare the mystery of Christ clearly). This landed him in prison, but they should still keep praying for his evangelistic outreach still.

5-6 Relating to outsiders. Paul turns from thinking of his mission to considering how the Colossians can play their part in it. They need to behave with wisdom (see 1:9, 1:28, 2:23, 3:16) and literally "redeem the time", buy it back, put it under its proper master, which means putting time to work for the sake of reaching out with the gospel. Our message must be clear, but our manner must be gracious (see Jesus in Luke 4:22 and the similar context in 1 Peter 3:15-16 where we are to speak with gentleness and respect). We should also speak in a way that provokes conversation (seasoned with salt – tasty, not bland; stimulating, not boring) and that has a winsome, wholesome influence on conversation. We should also be sensitive to how much salt we put in, that is, sensitive to the kind of answer each person requires (which will vary considerably). All of which implies we have a reasonable grasp of the gospel and can communicate it in an appropriate way and at an appropriate level depending on our conversation partners.

7-9 Two people Paul sent to Colosse. Paul was in prison (4:18 "my chains") so his letter came by the hand of his co-worker Tychicus. He also delivered Ephesians (Eph. 6:21) and given the similarities between Colossians and Ephesians, they were probably written at the same sort of time so Tich could deliver them on the same journey. He was also sent on important errands for Paul (see 2 Timothy 4:12 and Titus 3:12) and obviously earned the honourable titles Paul gives him here, as one who encouraged the saints and kept them in touch with Paul's mission. Onesimus, as a Colossian himself, provides another link between them and Paul. Onesimus is the slave mentioned in Philemon (which also mentions many of the same people). Paul sent people, not just letters, to the churches.

10-14 Greetings from Paul's companions. Paul next passes on greetings from his companions, several of whom are Jewish converts, an especial comfort to Paul who is on trial because of the conspiracy of certain Jews who disliked his mission to the gentiles (see Col 1:27, 3:11). They work with him for the kingdom of God (see 1:13), as does Epaphras, another Colossian link (see 1:7) who planted the church at Colosse. Paul specifically mentions Epaphras's prayers that they would "stand mature and fully assured" – which echoes the main point of the letter (e.g. 2:6-7, 2:10). Epaphras's concern for other local churches in the area is also mentioned, to encourage the Colossians to be involved in gospel partnership with them. Luke (the Gospel writer who often accompanied Paul) and Demas (who would eventually desert Paul, 2 Timothy 4:10) also send greetings. Paul has a number of co-workers in this international gospel mission, and is encouraging the Colossians also to maintain friendly relations with him and his work.

15-18 Closing Instructions. Paul gets them to talk to the nearby church at Laodicea (see 2:1) and to the female patron of a nearby housechurch. Then he instructs them to swap letters with Laodicea, so that his letters and teaching are circulated widely. Some argue that the Laodicean letter is what we call Ephesians, which may have been a circular, designed to be passed around several churches in that area. Again, the impression Paul gives is that there is something much bigger going on in "the Christian world" – the Colossians have joined something international and dynamic, not a small, exclusive cult. This again fits in with the purpose of the letter, and echoes 1:5-7. Paul closes with his signature and a reminder of his suffering. But, fittingly, grace gets the last word.

Implications

*** Praying for evangelism.** Paul's prayer request shows us how to pray for evangelism. We pray for God to do his work, and for evangelists to do theirs clearly. In the parallel passage in Ephesians 6:19-20 he asks for boldness, so it is not inappropriate to pray for clarity and boldness in all our evangelistic endeavours, especially for those who speak. These are also good prayers for ministers in all their work – that they would do it as they should, but they would also remember they can't do it all, and need to look to God to do his work of opening doors for the word in outward circumstances and inward appetites. Are we steadfast in such prayer?

*** Conversational evangelism.** One commentator says of verses 5-6, "the picture is as far as we can imagine from that of the Christian who has no interest in affairs outside those of the faith or church and no 'small talk,' no ability to maintain an interesting conversation. In contrast, it envisages opportunities for lively interchanges with non-Christians on topics and in a style which could be expected to find a positive resonance with the conversation partners... such advice envisages a group of Christians in a sufficiently positive relation with the surrounding community for such conversations to be natural" (Dunn, page 267). How can we be such people?

*** The catholic (small 'c') church.** Paul goes out of his way to demonstrate to the Colossians that they have not just joined a small cult or sect but are part of something so much bigger. This is designed to back up the message of the letter that they have everything they need in Christ and do not need to go wandering off into seemingly plausible human traditions and teachings that promise more. How can we be in touch with other churches and Christians around the world, such that we have partnership with them in gospel work and can be encouraged in this same way? How do we avoid narrowing our vision of what God is doing in the world and isolating ourselves from the comfort, encouragement, prayers (and correction) available from the wider church?