

Colossians Session #3: 2:6-

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In this next section (2:6-23) St. Paul will address the issues created by the Jewish troublemakers. By his comments scholars believe there were two main issues:

- The deity, or God-nature of Christ was being denied
- The adding of rituals and rules from the Mosaic laws as requirements of living a full Christian life.

St. Paul will reassert the complete divinity of Jesus as the Christ (2:9) and will stress the issue that Gentile believers are complete in their faith and have no need to revisit or incorporate the expectations of the Old Testament covenant that was a part of the Jewish ritual and law. Also, St. Paul has reminded the Colossians of their fullness of life through faith in Christ (1:15-2:5), he is ready to challenge them to stand firm in Christ and reject the false “philosophy” that is threatening their faith. In the remainder of chapter two St. Paul uses four vivid images to convey what happens when a person is baptized into Christ:

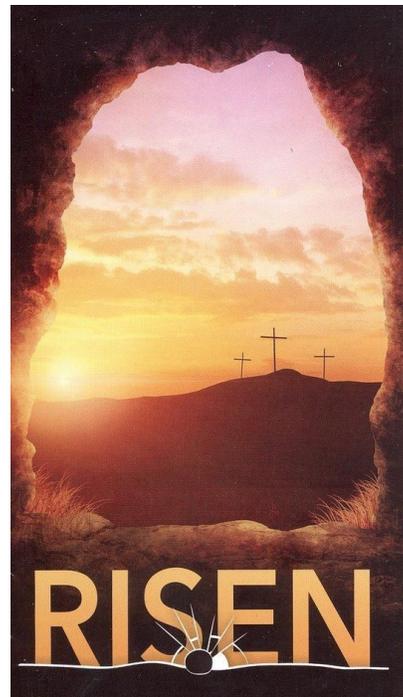
1. A spiritual circumcision (of the heart),
2. A burial and rising with Christ,
3. The cancelation of a debt – an IOU that is erased and even nailed to the cross, and
4. A victory over spiritual enemies.

There is a fifth that is subtler. Using the word “stripping” in verses 11 and 15, St. Paul is most likely alluding to the Christian baptismal rite of taking off an old garment and donning a new, white one after the immersion in the waters of baptism. This symbol will be somewhat the focus in 3:8-10.

Sharers in the Fullness of God 2:6-10

2:6-7 you received Christ Jesus: St. Paul is writing to believers who have received Jesus as their Lord and savior. This might be a message we would want to take root in the lives of our pre-teen Confirmation student who have been baptized. While it was a gift that was given to them as babies, they belong to God and God’s way. Therefore our challenge to them is to **live in him (Christ)**. Through their baptism they were **rooted** in the faith. As they grew in life they were also **built up in him (Christ)** through instruction and the other sacraments with the hope that it would **establish** (them) **in the faith**. But, St. Paul will go on to challenge this, for whatever reason they have departed from the faith being enchanted by easier roads.

2:8 by philosophy and human deceit: Our understanding of the word philosophy today we think of a way of thinking, of viewing or understanding the world around us. In the time of St. Paul the word “philosophy” was also used to refer to the Jewish way of life. (Even today there are individuals whose faith is more of a philosophy, an approach to life than it is a belief system.) Scholars believe



this is what St. Paul is speaking about – the Jewish way of life which denounces Jesus as the Son of God. St. Paul goes on further to challenge the **human traditions** embraced and celebrated by these Judaizers. The rituals we offer in prayer and praise are human expressions of inner truths and beliefs. The sign of the cross we make as we begin our prayers was not something God given. It was an expression, a prayer that within each of us in the sign, mark of the crucifixion. If done mindlessly and without intention the sign of the cross as well as so many other outward traditions of faith are nothing more than an empty gesture. St. Paul is challenging the Colossians to recognize that what false teachings they are being drawn into come from human minds, not from God. This was one of Jesus’ great teachings to the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Priests of the Temple. Salvation does not come from what we do, it is a gift given in love and mercy from God.

2:9 in him the whole-fullness of deity dwells bodily: The “him” here is Jesus Christ. This verse, this section is one of the foundational scriptures to our belief that Jesus Christ was fully God. *The mystery of the God-made-man was a stumbling block for many in Israel, who were skeptical that Yahweh’s (God) presence could reside in a man and who were scandalized that the Messiah should suffer the curse of crucifixion.* Ignatius Catholic Study Bible. Even today there are those who find it difficult to believe that a god would become incarnate, become man. And even if that were true, why would they suffer such a painful and humiliating death. St. Paul is stating here a mystery not to be solved but simply to be believed. God did become man and suffered & died so that we might know the gift of the depth of His love and the gift of salvation

2:10 head of all rule and authority: St. Paul reminds us that while we do have earthy authority over us – in the church there are bishops and the Pope; in the world there are many...police, presidents and kings; the ultimate authority in our lives as true believers must be God through Jesus Christ. Martyrs have gone to their death following their faith rather than the rule or authority of any earthly king.

Alive in Christ Jesus 2:11-15

2:11 a circumcision not administered by the hand: As we discussed in Philippians 3:3, Outward signs, outward action should be done as an expression of an inward state of mind and heart. An example: we make the sign of the cross not as a way to “dial up” God but to recognize that we bear the sign of the crucifixion with our own bodies. God made a covenant with Israel. Circumcision was an outward sign of that covenantal agreement in much the same way that baptism is an outward sign of our covenantal agreement with God. God will be our God and we are choosing to live in light of that loving relationship. *A circumcision not administered by hand* is St. Paul’s way of speaking of that interior disposition of the commitment made to live as Christ commanded. The image St. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:3 he develops more fully here talking of this circumcision happening *not administered by the hand*, done so as to emphasize that what was received in baptism was the grace of God and did not come by any human action. St. Paul is drawing on Old Testament prophecies (Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:26-27) to make the point that in Christ a new covenant has been created. One that requires an interior change of heart and mind (heart of stone to heart of flesh, Ezekiel). The outward

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expression of baptism is the hope of an interior disposition, a **stripping off the carnal body**. While baptism (in the Catholic Church) is a one time experience, a part of the sacramental nature is a process. For most it takes a lifetime to *strip away* what is not holy, healthy and coming from Christ. As a reminder of last weeks conversation, St. Paul uses the phrase *stripping off* as a reminder of the baptismal image of discarding one's clothing as one enters into the baptismal waters as a sign of leaving behind old ways of thinking, doing and being. When coming out of the waters of baptism the new Christians *put on Christ* (Romans 13:14), put on a new way of life symbolically represented by the donning of a white robe. Finally, in St. Paul writing **the circumcision of Christ** is NOT speaking of Jesus' own circumcision as an eight day old infant. Scholars all agree it speaks to the waters of baptism.

2:12 You were buried with him in baptism: Here St. Paul moves away from the image of circumcision to an even more powerful analogy relating baptism to death and resurrection. From the time of the early Church to this present moment, baptism has always meant a turning away from the ways of the world, the values of the world to embrace the gospel and live as Christ would have us live. The image of dying to the old self and then coming back to life as a *new creation in Christ* (2 Corinthians 5:17) is one of St. Paul's themes within his writing.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.

(Romans 6:3-6)

2:13 He brought you to life: St. Paul is bringing the two images of baptism together – the circumcision and death to new life, here in this verse. Remember that the community in Colossae is primarily pagan, therefore they are the **uncircumcision of your flesh**. Transgressions equals sin here.

2:14 obliterating the bond against us: The Greek word for bond (*cheirographon*) literally means a "hand-written document". St. Paul ends this section by going back to the beginning, the crucifixion of Christ. The "bond", our debt to God was "erased, wiped clean" was paid in full through the death of Jesus Christ. The paper that debt was written on also destroyed creating no memory of the relationship between God and us before Christ's gift of salvation. This bond was not just destroyed but *obliterated* meaning eradicated, annihilated, leaving no trace.

2:15 leading them away in triumph: In the ancient world, when a warring "general" would come back in triumph, he and his soldiers would march into the city to the shouts of joy by the citizens. In this march was paraded the enemies in humiliation. St. Paul offers this image as the one in which we can take delight in knowing that in Jesus' death and resurrection, in vanquishing sin, He too parades the powers of darkness and sin **despoiling** them. To *despoil* means to "strip off" their weapons, their power, their militia regalia. What does St. Paul mean by **made a public spectacle of them?** The cross was meant to be a instrument of fear, terror and horribly painful death. But, as St. Paul writes in 1

Corinthians 15:55 -- *O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?* Christ publicly humiliated the powers of darkness by taking their instrument of death and making it a symbol of life.

Warning Against False Advice 2:16-19

2:16 *Let no one, then, pass judgement:* Now having reminded the Colossians (and you and I) of the supremacy of Jesus Christ, St. Paul turns his attention back to the reason for his writing – those false teachings and beliefs. As stated at the beginning of this study, it is most likely that those Jewish Christians (Judaizers) were pushing the idea that to fully embrace the teachings of Jesus one must live within the traditions of the Jewish ritual faith – not eating certain foods, abstaining from certain drink and making their sabbath from sun down on Friday to Sun down on Saturday. The ritual practices of the Jewish faith were often lumped together in the Old Testament. The first two in the list: food and drink point to the practice of maintaining a kosher diet. The last three: festival, new moon and sabbath had to do with the prayer practices of the Jewish faith. “Festival” and “new moon” refers to liturgical celebrations that happened possibly monthly (new moon) and yearly (festival), as well as the weekly obligations to the sabbath rituals and prayers.

2:17 *These are shadows:* Speaking of the ritual observances of food, drink and the rest, these actions held by others are illusions, shadows of the real thing – ***the reality that belongs to Christ.***

2:18 *let no one disqualify you:* St. Paul is using a sports image to challenge readers to keep their eyes on Christ and not the teachings of others. The Greek word used for *disqualify* (*katabrabeuo*) means to decide against as in a referee judging an athlete unfit, unworthy therefore reclaiming their prize. We can assume from this that these self proclaimed “experts”, these false teachers were disqualifying the faithful of Colossae because they did not become involved in ***self-abasement*** Other translations offer: *Do not let anyone who delights in false humility.* Sincerity of heart in all things is what God requires. There are those even to this day who feign humility but in their heart believe the adoration offered them is deserved and expected.

and worship of angels: Scholars offer there are two ways of interpreting this idea of angels and worship. The first idea is that these Judaizers were actually worshiping angels as gods. Historians have shown that there was a community within Colossae at that time that worshiped another of false gods, one of which was angels. The second idea is that St. Paul is challenging the idea that the worship of angels before the heavenly throne is more valued by God than the worship of humans. St. Paul challenges either idea as false.

taking his stand on visions: The Greek word used here (*embateuo*), which is not used anywhere else in the New Testament, refers to the possession of property, specifically property owed through an inheritance. Therefore, scholars offer that what St. Paul is challenging is the false teaching that one is not a proper and full Christian until they have had a mystical vision. It would be like today someone telling us that we are not fully Christian until we can “speak in tongues” or “dance in the spirit” or have received some other physical manifestation of the Holy Spirit. We read in 1 Corinthians 8:1: *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.* To this day we have those among the faithful that think they are important and superior because of all that they know, or the power they

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hold. This is the stand of these false teachers in the time of St. Paul. They are lording over all because of their knowledge and power. As we have talked about all year, salvation is a gift. One that we are invited to accept and then live out in our lives. No amount of knowledge, power, position, deeds can guarantee what God has already given freely.

2:19 *not holding closely to the head:* This image only makes sense in like of understanding St. Paul's image of the community of faith as participating in the Body of Christ. The Church is the Body of Christ with Christ as the head. These false teachers are choosing to follow they own philosophy rather than remaining close to Christ, close to the head of the Church as well as close to the body of Christ whole body, ***nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.*** It is good to remember the teaching from Ephesians 4:15-16:

living the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

False Spiritual Practices 2:20-23

2:20 *to the elemental spirits of the universe:* In coming to the climax of St. Paul's teaching, he calls for the community at Colossae to not be seduced by false teachings that, in essence deny Christ. This section (2:20-23) parallels 2:6-8 which references the elemental powers of the world, human thought and wisdom. When we rely on our own powers or worship false gods we separate ourselves from God's light and love, and eventually our own gift of salvation.

2:21 *Do not handle...taste...touch:* If we could hear the voice of St. Paul we would hear a great deal of sarcasm in his voice. We is mocking the Jewish agitators who are falsely teaching that salvation comes from what you do, such as to remain "clean" one cannot touch a dead body, a blood nor anyone who is ill or ritually impure; such as to remain "clean" one must follow stick dietary laws not eating or drinking certain things so as to remain ritually pure. One of St. Paul's key teachings throughout his writings is the idea that Jesus Christ fulfilled the law and covenant found in the Old Testament and practiced by the orthodox Jews. Since Christ is the fulfillment then we are no longer bound to these old ways, these old practices and are given life not from the practices of old but from the gracious gift of God.

2:22 *all things destined to perish:* Simply put, all the "things" that the Jewish ritual law prescribe about bodies, blood, food and drink are insignificant because they will inevitably pass away, decompose. This should make us remember the words of Jesus: *Do you not realize that everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile the body, since it enters not the heart but the stomach and passes out into the latrine!*" St. Paul is challenging these teachings because they have been deemed important by ***human precepts and teaching.*** In other words by human thought, human creation. These teachings should lead us to understand that all too often we can get up in the ritual action of our faith and fail or forget the spirit behind the law and action. Example: A parent leaves their very sick child unattended because they "need" to go to Mass. Another example is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Three orthodox Jews walk by the man who was left bleeding and

dying due to thieves because they were on their way to the Temple and did not want to become “unclean” by the dying man’s blood.

2:23 no value against the gratification of the flesh: In this final statement St. Paul summarizes his teaching. St. Paul is saying that, apart from Christ, severe practices, as the Judaizers are falsely teaching, have no value in and of themselves for they do not keep in check the human inclination towards sin. As a matter of fact too much investment in these human actions can lead to sin, namely pride. These false teachers are acting as if they can get right with God through their own activities, turning religious practice into a kind of idolatry. They have lost touch with the head – Christ – who teaches true wisdom. St. Paul is saying that, apart from Christ, severe practices of self denial have no value in and of themselves. And in fact too much investment in them can lead to sin, such as pride. Attitudes like: “See what a good Catholic I am!” During the time of St. Paul, these Judaizers were acting and teaching the ideas that one can get right with God through their own activities, turning the action itself into a type of idolatry. Salvation ... mercy ... forgiveness ... grace, these are all gifts from God. No action on our part can earn us these things. Our actions should be an expression of our gratitude and humility before God in receiving these gifts

Reflection Questions:

1. Take a moment to define for yourself what it means to be a “good Catholic”. Would St. Paul agree with you?
2. In the sacrament of Penance/Confession we are given “actions” to perform. In light of St. Paul’s teachings how are we to understand these actions? Are they to earn God’s forgiveness or are they something else?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Baptism: 1213-1284

Buried with Christ: 628-630

Christ as Head of the Body: 792-795

Christ’s Life as Mystery: 514-515

Risen with Christ: 1002-1004

Son Reveals the Father: 238-242

Bibliography:

- The Catholic Study Bible NAR
- The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon by William Barclay
- The Navarre Bible: Captivity Letters
- New Collegeville Bible Commentary: First and Second Timothy, Titus, Philemon by Terence J. Keegan
- Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch
- Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, by Dennis Hamm, SJ
- www.bible.org