

From The Pulpit Of



Captivated By Christ

No. 6
Series: Colossians

Colossians 2:8-15

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Text

[8] See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. [9] For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, [10] and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. [11] In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, [12] having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. [13] And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [14] by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. [15] He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Picture a man walking down the street in Upstate NY shortly after the Civil War. Solomon Northup is a free black man, a successful violinist and carpenter. While walking, he's approached by two circus promoters who promise him a high-paying job. He accompanies them to DC, and soon finds himself drugged, bound, and in the cell of a slave pen. He is quickly sold into slavery. What started as a promise of prosperity, resulted in captivity. The promise was empty.

Captivity was a very real danger for the Christians in Colossae and is for us too. Look how our passage opens. It's a sharp warning: "Be careful! Don't be taken captive! Look out!" He's warning about promises of spiritual maturity that lead only to captivity. It's apparently important as it's the first thing he says on the heels of last week's instruction to be rooted and built up in the faith.

It's at least as important for us today, because the danger may be greater today. You don't have to be a regular churchgoer or even a spiritual person, to notice the increased interest in "spirituality" of our day. We are pummeled with promises of enlightenment and fulfillment— some well-intentioned — but many that lead away from Christ into captivity. And I'm NOT most concerned about the spirituality books written by non-Christians. These can pose problems, but can also be more easily sniffed out. Danger lurks when *pastors* are publishing on the "latest and greatest" ways to grow as a Christian. Add in all the podcasts, self-published books, and blogs written by anyone with a computer and we find ourselves surrounded by empty promises that lead to captivity.

We need today's warning to be careful of any path that promises a kind of “next level spirituality,” because many of them will lead us away from Christ.

As I read Col 2:8-15, listen for why we should not follow empty promises.

Did you hear what the passage was about? He doesn't first start talking about the empty promises. He talks about Jesus' person and work. The greatness of who he is and what he does is the reason to avoid empty promises.

- If you're newer to church, or investigating Christianity, it's a great week to be here as you have a chance to hear some of the most important aspects of what Christians believe.
- For the church, this passage is going to protect us from false promises by renewing our appreciation for Jesus.

The best way to avoid being captive to empty promises is to be captivated by Christ.

The first reason to be captivated by Jesus comes immediately. We read that Jesus brings us

1. GOD'S PRESENCE (9-10)

- a. The opening words of v9 may seem a bit abstract or not that compelling to us, because it's not new information. We celebrate Christmas every year. We “know” that Jesus is God.
- b. But friends, slow down a second and think. The one who inhabits eternity entered time. He who sits on high came low. God clothed himself in flesh and came to be with us.
 - i. **Note even the emphasis:** not just the fullness of God, but ALL the fullness of God. In bodily form. Just let that settle for a moment as you think about who Jesus is. The fullness of God in bodily form.
 - ii. The contrast between Christ and the competitors could not be more stark. Instead of the empty deceit, we have the fullness of deity.
- c. **Isn't this ultimately what all spiritual paths** striving for? proximity to deity, or their version of it?
 - i. Even if it is a simple nirvana or an atheistic awareness and peacefulness.
- d. The Bible is telling us that God came near to us in Jesus. He is and has what we're all looking for whether we know it or not. And we see in v10 that when we follow Jesus we are filled with God's presence.
 - i. **That means to** follow any other spiritual path would be a downgrade because we're missing out on the fullness God's presence.
 - ii. **One early minister wrote this way:**
 1. [Christ] in His great love took to Himself a body and moved as Man among men, meeting their senses, so to speak, halfway. He became Himself an object for the senses, so that those who were seeking God in sensible things might apprehend the Father... For this reason was He both born and manifested as Man, for this He died and rose, in order that...He might recall men from all the paths of error to know the Father.¹

¹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, paragraph 15.

- e. **Friends, we should be captivated by this** audacious claim. The Christmas hymn helps us with the right response:
 - i. *Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity!*
 - ii. Let us renew our appreciation for who Jesus is. Hail him. Worship him as the God who comes to us. And when we do, we'll be rightly suspicious of any empty promises.
- f. **This first reason is the foundation.** If Jesus is the fullness of God's presence, all other promises are empty.

It's a pretty big deal to have the Presence of God, right? What are the implications of such a staggering reality? What does it mean for us? That's the rest of the text: we'll see that because Jesus brings God's Presence, those who follow Jesus have God's power over sin, and God's pardon for sin.

2. GOD'S POWER (11-12)

- a. We're immediately confronted with what seems to be a strange metaphor v11. Why on earth are we talking about circumcision?! And what does it have to do with me and following Jesus?!
 - i. **Circumcision in the Bible begins** as a physical marker for those who trust God and belong to him. It's a kind of family crest for his people, Israel in the OT. But what does it mean for us, the church, today?
- b. **We get a more** clarity even in the next few words – that it is not a circumcision by hands, that is a physical one, but a spiritual one.
 - i. **And everyone** is relieved that we're not talking about the cutting of body parts or the removing of skin! Ha!
 - ii. **What then are we talking about?** Look again at v11. This "spiritual circumcision" is a kind of removal or cutting away, but it is a of "the body of flesh."
 - 1. The language of "flesh" is often used in the NT to describe our sinful nature, that is, our ways of life and desires that oppose God and his ways. I'm talking about our ungodly habits, actions, thoughts, and feelings that we all have but struggle to combat successfully.
 - 2. **We feel this** when we're trying to be patient with another driver, or a child, and finally we lose it and lash out. That's our flesh.
- c. **Well, what we find** here is that when we begin following Christ, we see that we get a metaphorical circumcision that marks us as belonging to his family. But now it isn't a cutting of skin, but a cutting away of these passions and lifestyles. We get God's power over sin.
 - i. **V11-12 shows that** it doesn't come through some crazy mystical experience, but simply through faith and pictured in our baptism. Our faith in Christ means that these old ways die, and we are raised with Christ.
 - ii. **We now live in a new way**, free from the flesh that is cut away with Christ. **Now we have** the power of God that transforms us day by day to be more like him.

1. **Does this mean that once we become Christians we never sin again?** That doesn't seem to be the case from the NT. But it does mean that we are raised to a new kind of living that offers us God's power to kill the sin that once killed us. And over time to be more like Christ whom we follow.
- d. **This is important.** Spiritual counterfeits ensnare us with their promises of freedom from these sinful and destructive habits. They offer a new form of self-help or spirituality that has little to do with Jesus. Almost like spiritual short cuts, or a microwave spirituality.
 - i. **Instead, they promise greater** spiritual growth through new disciplines or strategies. It can include prompts for positive or victorious thinking, monk-like rules for living, scripted kinds of prayer, or required fasts and Bible reading schedules.
 1. **None of which are necessarily** bad in themselves.
 2. But if they are not according to Christ, then they are empty promises.
 - ii. **Anything that prioritizes our actions** to free us from sin apart Christ's death and resurrection actually take us captive.
 - iii. **Let's be captivated again with** the power we get through Christ and being raised with him!
- e. **If Christ really is the fullness** of God, why would we think we needed power from some other place in order to live well with him and for him?

Because Christ brings us God's Presence, we have God's Power over sin. But what about when we fail to live with God's Power over sin? We continue to see the reasons why Christ we ought to follow Christ. Here's it's because

3. GOD'S PARDON (13-14)

- a. These verses open by fronting the most significant problem that needs to be addressed by every person. It's not just that we aren't "perfect."
 - i. That'd be like trying to jump to the top of the Sears Tower and saying "I just missed it."
- b. Instead, we see that our sin and trespasses (again metaphorically depicted here as uncircumcision), leave us spiritually dead.
 - i. **Adam and Eve** ignored the warning in the first pages of the Bible. They believed the empty promise from the father of lies. And all humanity is now captive to sin and death.
 - ii. **That's where we find ourselves.** Dead in sin. While we're alive in one sense, we're kind of the walking dead. Not merely separated from God by space, but alienated from him as enemies.
 - iii. **We live lives of sin and trespass:** the wrong things we think/feel/do, and the right things we don't think/feel/do.
- c. **When we sense this problem** in ourselves, we respond in different ways.
 - i. Some simply despair or give up and give in to sinful living. That doesn't mean that they've escaped the sense of problem. They've just buried it for a while.

- ii. **But others, maybe the kind of people who are here in church on a summer Sunday, try to resolve it by being better, doing better. Or going through some sort of religious rituals. Or turning over a new leaf of spirituality and promising to do better next time.**
 - 1. **Trying to compensate** for our shortcomings to try to satisfy God, or at least our conscience.
 - 2. **Now, if it were merely** a sickness it could be likely be treated. But what treatment is there for the dead?
 - 3. **Or there's another picture given. That of debt.** But the debt of sin is beyond what we can pay.
 - iii. **And now we're forced** to look outside of ourselves. But where can we find a solution to these problems?
 - d. **v13-14 show that Christ offers us God's pardon.** Not covering it up or eliminating it from our lives, but forgiving it. He pardons us.
 - e. God makes the dead alive by forgiving our sin.
 - f. **God then cancels the debt and frees us from the legal demands.**
 - i. Now the debt doesn't just disappear.
 - 1. **For example.** If you loan your friend \$20 for lunch, and then later forgive the debt the debt isn't simply disappearing. You are the one paying the cost by forgiving it.
 - ii. **Imagine the cost to God to forgive** not lunch for one, but of rebellion for billions.
 - g. **Look at how God does this in v14.** God absorbed the debt by nailing it to the cross.
 - i. **This is why it is so striking** to see that Jesus himself is the fulness of God. Because when the Jesus dies, it is God himself absorbing our debts and the legal charges against us.
 - ii. **He paid.** He absorbed. And that's how God forgives us the debt of our sin.
 - iii. **It's a substitution.** God dies for the guilty. And makes us alive by forgiveness.
 - h. **To the extent that we understand this, we'll be captivated by Christ.**
 - i. **Now, what better solution can you find for your sin?** The very one you offended is reaching out and doing all that is necessary to reconcile.
 - i. **This is available** for every person in this room right now. If you're realizing right now that you're one of the walking dead, captive in your sin, there is life available.
 - ii. **Turn to Jesus in faith.** Confess your sin to Him and give him your allegiance over everything else. **Talk to** a trusted Christian friend, or find a pastor after service.
 - j. Who can free you from the debt of sin better than God himself?!
 - i. **Augustine put it this way:** "He who for us is life itself -- descended here and endured our death -- and slew it by the abundance of his life."²
 - k. **And to top it all off we find the note of triumph in v15. By forgiving us at the cross, Christ defeated all every opponent and every empty promise.**

² Augustine, *Confessions*, 64.

- i. **He didn't just win.** It wasn't a narrow victory or nail-biter.
 - 1. It was a blowout. He disarmed them and publicly shamed all who oppose him or his people.
- ii. **If we are following Christ,** we don't need to fear
 - 1. what anyone can do to our bodies, since we have God's presence,
 - 2. missing out on spiritual growth, because God's power frees us from the flesh,
 - 3. we don't need to fear ultimate condemnation, God's pardon freed us from debt.
- 1. **When God destroyed** the document that contained our condemnation at the cross, he disarmed everyone that would threaten us and freed us to live.

On Jan 4, 1853 Northup was working in the field. Solomon is sighing for freedom under an unshakeable chain. Until a man arrived. The local sheriff arrives with the authority of the Secretary of War and a paper that proved Solomon was indeed free and to remove him from the plantation. The empty promises were undone by the power of man with authority. Captivity was canceled. He was free to live.

How much greater is the work of Christ on our behalf?

- Christ brings us the fullness of **God's presence. He gives us power over sin, and pardon for sin.**

Friends, what holds greater promise than this? Beware of empty promises.

We have every reason to be follow Christ alone. Repeat. Because Christ alone is captivating.