

Colossians 1:21-29 *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²²But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— ²³if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. ²⁴Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— ²⁶the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

I think every once in a while, it's good to step back and ask, "Why?" It's good to make sure there is a good and valid reason behind what you do or what you believe. It's better to ask why from time to time rather than blindly following someone or something without reason. I think it ok to wrestle with and struggle through the why to make sure you are solid and firm on your answer.

Paul helps us to do that today. He asks us: Why is Jesus better? Why do we follow Jesus and stand so firm on following him that we are even willing to suffer and sacrifice to continue doing so? There are a lot of philosophies and religious ideas out in our world today. There are many that sound appealing to our hearts and pretty good to our ears. What makes Jesus better? Out of all those ideas and philosophies, why do we follow Jesus especially when following him might bring suffering, ridicule and affliction? My friends get to go out to the lake on Sundays while I have to go to church. My neighbor gets all of his yard work done on Sunday mornings when I'm sitting at worship and Bible study. My co-workers come back on Monday morning and tell of all their weekend exploits while mine seem somewhat hampered because I carved out Sunday morning for worship and my Lord. Why should I continue in my faith? Why should I sacrifice and suffer to follow Jesus rather than all these other popular and appeasing ideas? Why is Jesus better?

The Colossians were asking the same question. False teachers were trying to infiltrate their church. These teachers were promoting teachings that robbed Christ of the glory and honor due him. We don't know exactly what these specific teachings were, but they emphasized what they referred to as "knowledge" and "wisdom". They were teaching that the simple gospel was not enough to save sinners but had to be supplemented with their teachings and ideas. They had a better way. They had a better knowledge and better wisdom to get to salvation that made them superior not only to Paul but essentially to Jesus. They were robbing Jesus of the glory that was his as the all-sufficient Savior, the eternal Son of God and Redeemer of mankind. Most importantly, they were attempting to pull these Christians away from their Savior.

So Paul wrote this letter to them with the encouragement to continue in their faith, *established and firm, and...not to move from the hope held out in the gospel* by reminding them of the supremacy of Christ. Paul wanted them to realize there was no better way to salvation than through simple faith in Jesus as their Savior. No matter how appealing these false teachers' claims sounded; no matter how tempting it was to go along with the crowd and follow these alluring ideas, there was no better way to salvation than through Jesus.

To drive his point home, Paul reminded them who they were in Christ. He did that using the before and after strategy. You're familiar with this strategy. You've probably seen before and after weight loss photos, or before and after makeover photos. The before photos always show something bad, run down, maybe even hideous and ugly. The after photos show the huge transformation that took place and show something beautiful, updated, fresh and lovely. Paul does the same thing by reminding the Colossians and us who we were before we came to know Jesus as our Savior. The before picture isn't pretty: "*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.*" The situation was grave. Before Jesus, the sinner is alienated from God. Alienated means being completely separated from God and foreign to God. Sinners are strangers to God, shut out from God's mercy and love. And it's not like that separation involved neutral feelings toward God. No, before Jesus, the sinner is alienated from God and enemies of him. Their alienation showed itself in their hatred and hostility of God. This alienation from God and hatred and hostility toward God showed itself in their evil, wicked works. The relationship sinners have with God by nature is ugly. It's brutal. Not only can sinners not find God or come to him or choose him, they don't want to. They are hostile toward God and want nothing to do with God. There's no way on one's own, that a sinner can contribute in any way to change this relationship with the holy and just God. They are destined alone to remain alienated and separated from God eternally. This is where the Colossians were before they came to know Jesus and that's where you and I were too. Before Jesus and without Jesus, the situation is not only brutal and ugly, but it is impossible! There is no better way!

But then comes the after photo. What a change! What a transformation Jesus makes in our relationship! The relationship that was characterized by hatred and hostility is now one of peace and reconciliation. After Jesus, the relationship the believer has with God is what God intended that relationship to be from the very beginning. The only one able to make this drastic change in our relationship with God is Jesus. This is what makes him superior to any other idea or philosophy for salvation. Only Jesus can present us before God as holy, blameless people who can stand before God

without any accusation able to be made against us. No other idea or religion can do this. Because Jesus was willing to come to earth as both God and man, he was able to make the sacrifice that God demanded for sin while giving us the perfection we need to stand before him. He came into this world to take the curse of sin on himself so that the broken relationship between God and sinners might be repaired and changed. The false teachers in Colosse spoke much about their own rituals and schemes and works and deeds as the way to bring about their salvation. Paul brushes all of that aside as irrelevant and unnecessary. Jesus has already done all that is necessary to remove the barriers which sin created between God and mankind. He has done all this by his cross and the shedding of his blood. Through his shedding of his blood and giving of his perfect life, our guilt is pardoned and his righteousness is credited to us. He earned full forgiveness for all sinners. The reconciliation he brought about is perfect and complete. No one else can do or even come close to doing what Jesus has done for us. He is superior to any other because he did what no one else can do: bring about reconciliation between us and God. There is no better way!

Were this not enough to prove the superiority of Jesus and the salvation he offers, Paul offers one more thought about the message of Jesus compared to the message of the false teachers in Colosse. The pseudo-gospel which the false teachers were proclaiming in and around Colosse was a message with many strange elements peculiar to that rather small group of teachers. It was a local message preached by a few in a small place. The Gospel of Jesus on the other hand has been preached worldwide for a long time. It is a universal message that applies to all creation. It is a message that has stood the test of time. Why would the Colossian Christians give up the salvation they had in Jesus for a new, local message that wasn't proven? The real question of our text is this: would they let a few local errorists separate them from the immense Gospel message they had in Jesus?

So Paul wrote to encourage them: "*continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.*" In order to be found holy, without blemish and be free of accusation before the great Judge and be able to stand on the last day, they needed to hold tightly to their faith, even if that meant suffering and affliction here on this earth. They would need to withstand the double danger of the pagan vices and the "better way" solution proposed by some. They would need to be tenaciously focused on the supremacy of Christ and the hope of eternal glory with this supreme Christ. Giving up Christ means giving up the salvation that he alone brings.

We find ourselves in the same boat as the Colossians. The progressivism of today claims a progress in knowledge toward something new. It claims a better knowledge and superior wisdom to what God offers in Jesus. They claim to have a higher knowledge, one that is progressed from the old and ancient truths proclaimed in Scripture. They belittle the gospel and regard it as something that is irrelevant for our modern age. They rob Christ of his power by claiming it doesn't matter who you are or what you do, God loves you and will welcome you into heaven anyway. They steal his glory away from him by claiming you can do your own thing and God will accept you as you are. They seek to infiltrate your faith by influencing you that you don't have to go to church or do that religious thing. It doesn't matter. God is loving and doesn't care about that. Their logic is alluring and their words are enticing, especially to our sinful natures. But let's understand the consequences: they seek to rob us of our salvation! Giving up Christ means giving up salvation. The specifics of the heresy today compared to the Colossians may differ some, but the end result and the consequences are the same: they rob Christ of his glory and bring eternal damnation to us.

We already have with Jesus what is far superior to anything else. Why would we give that up? There is no better way. The lie is that you can do both: follow Christ and follow the world and you will be fine. The truth is, you cannot worship both. You can only follow one. We already have what is unique and supreme. There is no better way than Christ for our salvation. God has made this mystery known to us and through the Holy Spirit worked faith in our hearts to believe this. Why would we give this up? The question we have to challenge ourselves with is: will we let the passing notions of today which have only been around for a short time separate us from the immense Gospel we have in Jesus?

What we have in Jesus is worth holding on to regardless of what we face. Paul's encouragement to the Colossians is his encouragement to you and to me: *continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.* We are still sinners. We will not reach perfection in our faith and lives here on this earth. That will come only once we leave this world and enter into the glory of heaven. So we as God's people need to press on and strive constantly to grow toward full maturity in Christ. This is discipleship—not only to come to faith but to continue to grow in faith. We need to work to maintain our faith and grow in our Christian living. This happens only in God's word. Jesus in the Gospel lesson today reminds us that his word is the one thing needful. Only through the word shared with us in Scripture can we hold tightly to Jesus in faith and grow in our faith.

All of this is what makes Jesus better. This is why it is worth holding on to Jesus even if that means suffering and affliction, even if that means ridicule and laughter, even if that means sacrificing the things of here. What God has waiting for us in Jesus is better by far than anything we could have here. What God has done for us in Jesus by earning and giving salvation is something that no one else can give us. It's worth holding on. It's worth standing firm. It's worth facing anything this world can bring at us. Jesus alone forgives us and Jesus alone gives us life. Hold firm to your faith in him and be confident about why we follow him. There is no better way. Amen.