



Central Peninsula Church

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Colossians 2:1-5
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If I Have God, I Need People

SERIES: *Colossians: Complete in Christ*

Those who teach the Scriptures and seek to help others in the name of Christ often find themselves confronted with a dilemma. The people they're trying to help often times have a real commitment to God and his word. They want to please him and obey his word. But so often these same people are handicapped in their efforts to grow because they have been taught certain ideas that sound very Christian, ideas that appear to be supported by verses in the Bible, but in fact these ideas are false. So part of the challenge of helping others grow is debunking these myths about the Christian life.

One of these myths goes like this: If I have God, I don't need people. If I really depend on God, I need not depend on others. People disappoint us, people fail us, but God never fails us, so we should look to God and not others to meet our needs.

Sounds good, and as with most Christian myths there is a kernel of truth in it, but it's a lie. Certainly God CAN directly meet all of our needs, but the fact is God often chooses to use people instead. Just like God can drive your car to church, but he lets you do it. He can mow your lawn, but he lets you do it. God can counsel you in a time of confusion, but often he lets a trusted friend do it.

Throughout the Scripture we see people meeting other people's needs. God could have met all of Adam's needs, but instead he gave him a helpmate. God could have met all of David's needs as he fled from Saul, but instead he gave him a soul mate named Jonathan, who Scripture says "**encouraged him in God**" (1 Sam. 23:16). God could have spoken to the Ethiopian eunuch who puzzled over the book of Isaiah, but instead he sent Philip to explain it to him. Philip asked, "Do you understand what you're reading?" "How can I," the Ethiopian said, "unless someone explains it to me?" What if Philip said, "Well, I can't help you there. You need to look to God for your answers. See you later."

If it were true that we're to have all of our needs met by God alone, then for us to try to help others would be to cause them to sin. In fact, I'd be causing you to sin by teaching you this morning. I'd be causing

you to listen to me rather than to God. So a parent might stand over a crying infant and tell her to be comforted by God - then walk away. Or a husband might refuse to reassure his wife of his love because she should be looking to Christ for love. Or a well-off couple might say to a needy neighbor, "Sorry, we can't help you. We'll pray for you though. God will meet your needs." Or a single person might conclude their desire for a husband or wife is sinful because they should desire only God.

At times it may sound good, but it doesn't square with life and it doesn't square with Scripture. At first glance, we might think this is what the book of Colossians teaches. If Colossians has a theme it's the sufficiency of Christ. Paul says in Colossians if you have Christ, you have it all. No need to look beyond him for knowledge. No need to look beyond simple trust in him to bring about the changes in your life that are needed. We might conclude: If I have Christ, I don't need people.

Wrong conclusion. In Col. 2:1-5 Paul debunks this myth, and in fact he tells us, if we have Christ, we need people more than ever. Not only do we need people, we need deep connection with people.

"For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive argument. For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ."

There are two things going on here. First, we see Paul's deep connection with the Colossians as a model for ministry. Second, we see the Colossians deep connection with one another as a model for how

we grow in the Christian life. Look first at Paul's ministry.

I. Deep connection is needed for meaningful ministry

A. To care for even those we have never seen: Notice in v. 1 Paul mentions he'd never even seen these people. Remember he was in prison and he had met a man named Epaphras from the Lycus Valley where Colossae and Laodicea were located. Paul led him to Christ and sent him back there to share his faith and soon there were gatherings of believers there. Paul had never been there and yet still felt this connection with them.

I can remember visiting my relatives in Italy for the first time. We had never even corresponded. They didn't even know I existed. My wife and I came to them unannounced with just a letter of introduction written in Italian by my uncle. They looked out the second story window with puzzled faces as I butchered the Italian language and read the letter. But the minute they realized who I was and how we were connected, they practically jumped out the window to greet us!

In Christ, we care about those we have never seen because we're connected as family. We care about believers in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. It's interesting, Colossae was "nowheresville" in Paul's day. It could have been Dry Gulch, Arizona, or Winnemucca, Nevada, or Booger Hollow, Arkansas. You would think you have nothing in common with them but you find out there is a connection because you share a common Father and a common Savior.

B. To agonize over their welfare: As a matter of fact, Paul's connection with these people was so deep he says he struggled on their behalf. The word he uses is taken from the Greek Olympic games - agon. We get our word "agony" from this. This word described the actual place where people gathered to watch the contest. Paul says, "I'm in the agon for you. That's how much I care."

There are various ways in which he agonized. He agonized in his efforts to spread the gospel. He also agonized in his parental-like worry for all the churches. He wrote, "**Apart from all these external sufferings, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches**" (2 Cor. 11:28). Paul knew the agony of an anxious mother, lying awake at night, brooding over all the things that could happen to her children. Not only that, he agonized in his battle with those who opposed his work. As an old man he writes to Timothy, "**Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm...be on guard against him...for he vigorously opposed our**

teaching" (2 Tim. 4:14). Finally, Paul agonized in prayer. He knew that they were in a spiritual battle and the battle would be won or lost on his knees. In 4:12 he tells the Colossians that Epaphras "**labors earnestly (wrestles) in prayer.**" Where did he learn that? He learned it from Paul.

I wonder who are we agonizing over? Who are we connected to deeply enough that we can say, "I struggle on your behalf. I strive with all my heart to bring you the Gospel. I'm worried sick about your spiritual condition. I agonize in prayer over you constantly."

C. To stay free from delusion: One of reasons Paul was worried and wrestled over the Colossians was that they were in harm's way. There were false teachers who were twisting the truth. Paul's connection with the Colossians was such that, even though he was absent in body, he could warn them as one with them in spirit. He says, "I don't want anyone to delude you with persuasive arguments." That word "delude" means "to reason falsely." These false teachers were using their heads. They weren't stupid. They reasoned; they argued persuasively. It's easy to get sucked in. We must be discerning. There's a lot of very persuasive folks who argue with what appears to be air-tight logic, but their conclusions don't add up.

You turn on the TV and you see a distinguished looking older gentleman talking about spirituality. He's not ranting and raving. You listen and he seems to know what he's talking about. The camera scans the audience; they all look very intelligent, they listen attentively, they nod believably. You have to admit, he seems sincere and some of what he says makes sense. He's honest about himself and tells a story that brings you to tears. He even quotes Jesus, but something's not right. You're not sure whether you should send in for the tapes or write him off as a heretic.

Here's the point: At times, all of us need others to help us see through these delusions. The Body of Christ is like a giant filtration system where together we filter out the stuff that may sound good and may even make us feel good, but isn't true. It doesn't matter how well you know the Scripture. As important as that is, it's not enough. We need each other. At one point in his ministry even the great apostle Peter needed Paul to stand up to him and say, "**Peter, you're wrong.**" (Gal. 2:11). We all need people like that to come along and say, "You're being fooled."

D. To rejoice in their progress: Fortunately, the Colossians hadn't yet caved in, so Paul pats them

on the back and says in v. 5, **“I rejoice to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.”** Paul's connection with the Colossians resulted in his joy over their steadfast faith in the face of the enemy. Notice his ministry to them brought him agony and it brought him ecstasy. It brought him pain and it brought him joy. It gave him the highest high and the lowest low. It's kind of like parenting. When you sign up to be a parent you sign up for the roller coaster ride of your life. Trust me - it's true! You're going to have so much fun, so much joy, and so much pain, so many tears, so many sleepless nights.

There is really only one way to avoid that pain - isolate yourself. If not physically, do it emotionally. Don't let your guard down. Climb into your cocoon. Down let anyone get too close. Be friendly, but keep your emotional distance. Anything else is too risky, too painful. You can live like that, but you'll never make a difference in anyone's life, you'll never have a ministry with any depth, and here's the kicker - you'll never really know joy. Just as God himself, knowing what was to come, took the risk to create us, to seek a relationship with us, and even to share the most precious part of himself with us - His Son - we've been created to take that risk.

I have God, I don't need people? No! If I have God; if I have his call on my life to make a difference, if I'm going to be able to navigate the spiritual land mines of ministry, I need people more than ever. But that's not all. I need people if I am going to even grow in my own walk as a believer.

II. Deep connection is needed for genuine growth

At the heart of this passage is vv. 2-3. Paul says he agonizes,

“that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

A. To be encouraged: We need to unpack this. What's clear is that Paul wants these people to be encouraged. The word can also mean “strengthened.” In light of what they were facing I think this is a better translation. They needed to be strengthened, bolstered to stand against the lies that were being propagated.

B. To grow in understanding and knowledge: It's also clear he wants them to grow in the depth of their understanding and knowledge. He talks about “the

wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding.” The idea here is that he wants them to be confident and at rest in the truth. The truth does that, you know. The truth about Christ brings assurance, it brings rest. That's the greatest wealth we can have. In the midst of life's storms to be able to rest assured in the truth of who God is and who we are in him. If you don't have that, it doesn't matter how much money you have, you're living in poverty.

In this context he also talks about attaining a true knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ. He says all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ. That's quite a statement. There is no truth in this universe that's not somehow wrapped up in the person of Christ. Alexander Maclaren wrote, “The central fact of the universe and the perfect encyclopedia of all moral and spiritual truth is Christ, the Incarnate Word, the Lamb slain, the ascended King.” That means if you know Christ, you know more than Stephen Hawking and all the great minds of our day put together!

The past couple of weeks I've been receiving e-mails from one of our college students asking me questions. He's in an academic environment that has caused him to experience some doubts in his Christian faith. The first thing I told him was that it's okay to ask questions. We can bring all of our questions to Christ. He's not threatened by our questions. All the answers lie in him. I think it freed him up just to know that and we've had a great interchange.

When we understand that all truth is found in Christ it produces in us both contentment and hunger. On the one hand, we're content; we know that we don't have to look outside of Christ for truth. We've found the mine that contains all the gold. On the other hand, we're hungry for more of him because we know we haven't even begun to dig out the golden treasures of wisdom he contains. This is what makes life exciting, this is what keeps us from stagnating. There's always more to learn, more of him to know.

But here is what I want you to see. How does this knowledge come? The second phrase of v. 2 is the hinge upon which the whole verse turns: **“...having been knit together in love.”** Listen to what F.F. Bruce, probably the finest NT scholar of this generation, wrote about this verse: “Paul emphasizes that the revelation of God cannot be properly known apart from the cultivation of brotherly love within the Christian community.” Did you hear that? Do you see the connection? Without being knit together with your brothers and sisters in Christ in meaningful relationship you can't enjoy the wealth that comes from the full

assurance of understanding or attain the true knowledge of the mystery.

Why is that? Because those people are more often than not the vehicle through which Christ is made known to you. How do you get to know Christ's love? By being loved by his people. How do you get to know Christ's power? By seeing it at work in other people. How do you deepen in Christ's wisdom? By watching others flesh it out. How do you experience Christ's forgiveness? By being forgiven by others.

This past week I was sitting at Peet's coffee getting a little work done. I had all my notes on this passage spread out and I was taking notes from a commentary. I noticed a guy staring at my notes and finally he said, "Looks like heavy stuff." I said, "Well, sort of." He asked what I did and I told him I was a pastor. As we talked, I could tell he knew his way around the Bible. He was very interested in the intellectual side of the faith. I could tell that he was either a believer or had grown up in a believing family. I asked him if he had a church he was part of. He looked at me a little squeamishly and said, "No. I suppose I should. I just can't find one that goes deep enough into the Word, so I just study on my own." And then I looked at this passage and it struck me that you can't do that. It doesn't work that way. You can't really grow in the knowledge of Christ apart from being knit together with the body of Christ. You might be able to learn more facts, but you can't really grow in true knowledge.

C. To stay true to God: If I have God, I don't need people? Come on! I can't even have God apart from people! I can't even know God apart from people! I can't even love God apart from people! I can't stay true to God apart from people! That's why in v. 5 Paul rejoices in their **"good discipline and the stability of their faith in Christ."** Those are military terms that literally mean to be "drawn up in battle array with a solid wall of defense." You just can't do that by yourself.

Think about that one sin you can't seem to shake. You know what it is. Have you bought into the thinking that says, "All I need is God. If I just get disciplined enough or learn to tap into his power, I'll beat it." Guess what? No you won't. You'll never conquer that sin unless you bring that sin into the light of community and ask for help.

Whatever you have to do to put yourself in a position to experience connectedness with others in

Christ's body, do it. Why wouldn't you? Maybe you tried it once and got burned. Maybe you're afraid that some area of your life will be exposed. Maybe it will put other relationships at risk, relationships you know aren't healthy. Maybe you're a leader and it's much safer just to keep your distance. Maybe you're just one of those guys who like to "go it alone." Whatever the reason for NOT doing it, consider what you sacrifice. Your whole experience with God depends on the choice to step into community. It's not enough to just come here and show up on Sunday morning. It's a good start, but you can come here and hide, and so you'll need more. You'll need a smaller group. You'll need to work at it. It's not easy, but it's the only way to progress in your walk with God.

Psychologist Milton Rokeach wrote a book called, *The Three Christ's of Ypsilanti*. In it he described his attempts to treat three patients at a psychiatric hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Each of them suffered from delusions of grandeur. Each believed he was unique among humanity; he had been called to save the world; he was the messiah.

He had a hard time helping these patients accept the truth about who they were. So he decided to put the three together to see if rubbing shoulders with each other might make a difference. It was kind of a 12-step group for recovering messiahs. Rokeach observed some interesting conversations among the three guys. One would claim, "I'm the messiah, the Son of God. I was sent here to save the earth."

"How do you know?" Rokeach would ask.

"God told me," he would answer.

But then one of the other patients would counter, "Wait a minute. I never told you that!"

Every once in a while, one of them would get a glimmer of reality, never very deep or for very long. But whatever progress they made was made by being together.

Whatever progress you and I make in our ministry or in our growth will be made by putting us together. If you have God, you need people more than ever.

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