

Colossians No. 7
Colossians 2:6-15
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We read vv. 6-12 last time, but I'll read them again to remind you of the context.

Text Comment

- v.6** By the way Paul's verb is "walk." If you remember one of the defects of the NIV as a translation of the New Testament was that it tended to obscure the connection of thought in the letters of the Apostle Paul by rendering a term he used to connect his thoughts with different English equivalents. For example in Ephesians 2 at the end of that first paragraph, in the great summary of God's salvation by grace, we read, "We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works that God prepared beforehand that we might *walk in them*." That's the theological statement in Ephesians 2. When you come to the ethical part of Ephesians, which begins at the beginning of chapter 4, we are urged in a summary way "to *walk*" worthy of the grace that we have received. Ethics are being tied to Paul's theology by the use of the same word "*walk*." We were saved to walk and now we are being commanded to walk worthy of the grace that we have received. Several more times in those last three chapters we are told "to walk" or "our walk" is described for us. Do not walk as the unbelievers do, but walk in this way, in faith and obedience and so on. But the NIV used several different translations of the Greek verb to walk and as a result readers lost the connection of Paul's thought because the term was not visible in all of its uses in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If you will notice, the ESV does not make that mistake. It's one of its advantages. So you have in Paul's prayer in chapter 1:10, his petition that we walk in a manner worthy of the Lord and now we are commanded to walk. Paul has prayed that we "will walk" and now he is ordering us "to walk" in him.
- v.8** Celsus, a pagan critic of Christianity who wrote a major attack on the new religion in the 2nd century to which Origen wrote a famous rejoinder, his celebrated *Contra Celsum*, belittled Christians because they were divided into competing sects with divergent views (he was speaking especially of mainstream Christians, on the one hand, and Gnostics on the other). So what do you reply to someone who is saying, "Oh, you Christians, you can't agree with anybody. You've got different views about absolutely everything in the Bible and you've got a different church for all those different views." What would you say? Origen replied that such differences were rather a mark of intellectual seriousness. Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 111. Christians work hard to find out what exactly is the truth of God because you care to know it.
- v.13** Once again, as we noted last time in regard to v. 11, "circumcision" in this context is being used metaphorically as a spiritual reality, not a physical rite. Uncircumcised flesh -- flesh being Paul's ordinary term for human nature -- is the equivalent of sinful flesh or unrenewed human nature. He is speaking of their moral and spiritual, not their physical condition. In any case, clearly, as we would otherwise expect, from the evidence of Acts

and the rest of the New Testament, most of the Christians in the church in Colossae were Gentiles. There were Jewish Christians among them, but most of them were Gentiles who would not have been circumcised.

God made us alive by forgiving our sins. Here is another of Paul's typical "before and after statement." You were dead, but God made you alive! Life and death in the Bible do not usually refer to bare existence, but to the condition of life. If you are still in your sins and sin is still your master, you are dead no matter how lively you may seem to others. In the same way, if your sins have been forgiven by God, you are alive and brimming with life no matter if your bodily life is ebbing from you as a result of disease or starvation or accident.

And notice that it is *God* who has done this. In such statements as these throughout the New Testament, where the Son is mentioned in distinction from God, "God" is a reference to God the Father. The Father sent the Son to achieve *his* purposes, which, of course, were also the purpose of his Son and the Spirit. In the previous verse it was the Father who raised Jesus from the dead and so it is the Father who raises us from spiritual death.

We have here a further reminder that nothing greater can be conceived than what God has already done for us in Christ. In other words, we aren't going to need more than this!

- v.14 The term translated "record of debt" in verse 14 referred to a statement of indebtedness, usually personally signed by the debtor. It was what we would call today an IOU. "The bond in question here is signed by men's consciences: for a Jew, it is his acceptance of the revealed Law of God as an obligation to abide by; for the Gentile, it is a corresponding recognition of obligation to what he knows of the will of God. In either case, it is an 'autographed' undertaking: 'I owe God obedience to his will.' Signed, Mankind." [Moule, 97] This signed IOU is against us because we haven't made good on our obligation. That is the sense of "with its legal demands." [This is a short form of Paul's much longer argument in Romans 1-3.]

God wiped out this IOU -- in those days the writing on a wax tablet would be smoothed out so that it could be used again -- by discharging our debt on the cross. If Colossians were being written today the metaphor would be different but would mean the same. Paul would have written perhaps: "But God has stamped "Paid in Full" on our IOU, Christ having paid the debt on our behalf.

It is from this statement, as you know, that Horatio Spafford coined the lines of his hymn:

My sin, O the bliss of this glorious thought;
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is *nailed to the cross*, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord...O my soul. [cf. Clark, 90]

v.15 Without a doubt the reference here to spiritual powers is due to the fact that the false teachers were making much of them in their system of thought and, in particular, their teaching about spiritual advancement. In the teaching of the false teachers these supernatural powers somehow dominate the world and so must be appeased or served in some way. Paul has already put them in their place by reminding his hearers -- remember, the letter was read out to the congregation; everyone did not have his own copy to read and study as we do -- that Christ created all the spiritual beings. They are his creatures and are subject to him. But here he goes further and says that Christ also defeated them at the cross and -- at least in the spiritual world -- their defeat was manifested to all. He is obviously speaking only of the sinful spiritual powers. The holy angels are not in rebellion and so were not defeated; indeed, they shared in the victory! The idea is akin to the Roman triumph: where the victorious general led his captives in process through the capital city. It is absolutely correct to believe in the existence of supernatural beings who, though we cannot see them, have real power in and exercise influence over this world. But we must not believe *too much* in them, as if they were independent of God's powerful rule or were able to defeat his interests in our lives. This seems to have been the false teachers' mistake. [Clark, 92]

The other thought here is that it is only through our sin that evil powers gain control of us and Christ delivered us from our sin and so from our bondage to the devil and his minions. When the IOU was cancelled the evil spirits were disarmed. [Lucas, 107-109] That is the sense of the flow of Paul's words in those last two verses.

You are aware, I'm sure, that given its place in the heart and center of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the cross, or the atonement as it is often referred to, is one of those doctrines about which there is not and has never been complete agreement in the church. If Christians disagree about many things, as they do, they will inevitably disagree about the cross, which is the center of our faith, every part of our faith connected to it. Just what was it that Jesus was doing when he died on the cross? How did he accomplish our salvation there? Through the ages, some have taught what is ordinarily referred to as the *moral influence* view of the cross. By going to the cross Jesus demonstrated his mighty love for us and by the demonstration of that love he wins our love and loyalty in return. That's moral influence. Others have taught the so-called *moral government* view of the atonement. According to this thinking, while God could have simply forgiven our sins, he didn't require a payment to be made, he couldn't simply forgive without undermining our commitment to righteousness. If God is just going to forgive all the sins that we commit, why not kick up our heels and commit a lot of them? According to this thinking the cross was designed to demonstrate in the most profound way God's hatred of sin and his love of righteousness and for that demonstration the Lord Jesus went to the cross. By so doing he upheld God's moral government of the world and impressed mankind with the need to live righteous lives. In early Christianity and often since, theologians have advanced the *Christus Victor* understanding of the cross and the atonement, viz. that at the cross the Lord defeated the Devil and his kingdom and so freed his people from bondage, because their bondage was to the Devil. You can find advocates of all these views of the cross still today.

None of these theories of the atonement makes much of anything, in fact many of them are designed not to make anything, of God's holy wrath against our sin, of human guilt that requires

judicial satisfaction, or of the cross as divine punishment being borne in our place by our substitute. *That* understanding of the atonement, known in the history of theology as *penal substitutionary atonement* – penal because it is punishment, Christ bearing the punishment we deserve, and substitutionary because it is vicarious punishment, punishment being suffered not by us but by a substitute – and all of that as a means of delivering us from the guilt of our sin – guilt meaning liability to punishment. When we say that somebody is “not guilty by reason of insanity”, we’re not saying he didn’t commit the crime; we’re saying he can’t be punished for the crime. Guilt is liability to punishment and God took our liability to punishment away at the cross by Christ suffering it in our place. Penal substitutionary atonement is far and away the ordinary understanding of the cross first in Christian theology and then in the Christian mind and heart. Even when the theologians of a particular theological tradition teach a different view of the atonement, the people sitting in the pews of the churches of that tradition typically hold to this understanding of the cross – Jesus bearing my punishment in my place as my substitute. This is the historic understanding of Roman Catholics, of the Orthodox, and of Protestants and is so because it is so clearly the understanding of the cross taught in Holy Scripture in text after text, sung in the church’s great hymns, and enshrined in creeds and catechisms. It is the understanding of the cross we are given here briefly by Paul in v. 14 and at far greater length in Romans 1-3, Gal. 3, 2 Corinthians 5, and Philippians 2 and 3. It is the view of the atonement we are taught in Isa. 53, indeed in the entire body of Old Testament sacrificial teaching and by the Lord Jesus himself.

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way,
And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

“By his stripes we are healed. The punishment that brought us peace, was upon him.”

“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

“The son of man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many.”

“Well might the sun in darkness hide and shut his glories in,
When Christ, the Mighty Maker died for man the creature’s sin.”

“Here I rest, in wonder viewing all my sins on Jesus laid,
Here I see redemption flowing from the sacrifice he made.”

“What wondrous love is this, O my soul, that caused the Lord of bliss
To bear the dreadful curse for my soul.”

But it is worth noting that while those other theories of the atonement are seriously defective for what they deny, they are perfectly true in what they assert. If the cross is penal substitutionary atonement, it is certainly also the greatest conceivable demonstration of God’s great love and it does woo and win us to the love of God and Christ in response.

“Upon the cross of Jesus mine eye at times can see
The very dying form of one who suffered there for me:

And from my stricken heart with tears two wonders I confess,
The wonders of redeeming love and my own worthlessness.

In the same way, never do we see God's abhorrence of sin and the need for righteousness more clearly than at the cross and no one who takes Christ's death to heart will ever again sin lightly.

Ye who think of sin but lightly nor suppose the evil great,
Here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate.

And it is a fact that the Lord's death on the cross was the ultimate defeat of Satan and his kingdom. *Christus victor est! Christ is the Victor there.*

"Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And has shed his own blood for my soul."

What is the fundamental answer to the buffeting of Satan? The blood of Christ shed on the cross.

In other words, while the Bible makes it perfectly plain that Jesus went to the cross to bear in our place the punishment our sins deserved and which otherwise we would have to suffer ourselves, while Christ died on the cross to satisfy divine justice on our behalf so that we might be forgiven and made fit for heaven, *it is at the same time true* that the cross had these other salutary effects, not the least being the conquest of the kingdom of evil spirits, as Paul makes a point of saying here in v. 15. There are many assumptions hidden here that the apostle does not enumerate. The rest of the Bible is required for that.

1. There is a kingdom of evil spirits who are in rebellion against the kingdom of God;
2. This kingdom is the enemy of the people of God and their welfare and interests. Evil spirits want everyone to hate God as they do. They do not want anyone to rise to heaven and eternal life. They want the kingdom of God to be empty of human beings and want every human being to be consigned to the same miserable and hopeless existence into which they cast themselves by their rebellion. Misery loves company!
3. Christ did battle with this kingdom on his people's behalf and defeated it by rescuing them from the power of sin;
4. It was not enough for Jesus to be more powerful than the demons, as he repeatedly demonstrated in the exorcisms he performed during his ministry or in his personal confrontations with Satan. It was our sin that made us slaves of the evil one and only by removing our guilt and breaking the power of sin in our lives could we be delivered from Satan's kingdom. This Jesus did at the cross.

Now, to be sure, the Bible is not very forthcoming with the details of the activity of this kingdom of evil spirits. We have intriguing references to demons who occupy positions of authority over nations and kingdoms in Daniel 10 and to the need for believers to be on guard against the devil's schemes. We laugh at medieval theologians who were supposed to have discussed how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, but we learn in the Gospels that many of them, a

legion, could inhabit the soul of one man and that seven inhabited Mary Magdalene at one time. We read of the devil as the prince of this world, the god of this age, and the ruler of the kingdom of the air. We read of him as the tempter and as the accuser of the brethren (his name Satan means “accuser”). We read of him disguising himself as an angel of light. We are told that nothing but the power and grace of God can enable us to stand against him. But how all of this works out in human life the Bible does not say and we cannot know.

The devil is not God. He is not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnipresent. How he influences the life of mankind is never made clear to us in the Bible. This has led to a lot of foolish speculation on the part of Christians through the ages. Some years ago a prominent American minister, a man known for his enormous girth, reported that he had the demon of gluttony cast out of him. But he was too honest for his own good. He admitted months later that he hadn’t lost any weight. It has always been a danger that Christians would blame the devil for their own sins and attempt to use exorcism as a shortcut to the hard, painful, and lengthy work of putting sins to death and growing in holiness and maturity of life. It is not as if there would not be plenty of sin in this world without the devil. Our own nature and the world could churn up plenty of evil all by themselves!

But the fact is we western Christians typically pass by a text like Col. 2:15 with very little thought or reflection and hurry on to something we can make more sense of. The kingdom of evil spirits is not a living reality for most of us most of the time. I attended a seminar some years ago taught by Dwight Linton, for twenty-five years a Mission to the World missionary in Korea. The subject was the place one’s culture plays in our understanding of the Bible and our practice of the Christian faith. He gave the class some fascinating illustrations of how culturally diverse even Presbyterians can be and how dramatically different cultures can shape Presbyterian thought and life in different ways.

In twenty-five years of serving with Presbyterian church sessions, presbyteries, and General Assemblies in Korea, he said, he had never once seen a copy of any minutes. They were taken, but they were never used or referred to publicly. Never once did he hear an appeal made to parliamentary procedure. They had rules of procedure somewhere but they were never appealed to. Relationship is so important in Korean culture, the showing of respect so sacred an obligation, that no one would ever insist upon the body following a rule for fear that doing so would put someone in his place and he would be shamed. After I heard that I thought that the Korean men who come to PCA General Assemblies must think they have landed on Mars!

But another of his illustrations of the influence of culture on our religious outlook had to do with the world of angels and demons. In charting American culture’s hierarchy of life, which was easy to determine from a number of surveys, he listed from the top down:

God [because most Americans still believe in a personal God]
 Man
 Pets
 Other Animals
 Plants

Then he set that hierarchy over against Indian culture's hierarchy of life. The population of India is now the largest of any nation in the world. Again from the top down:

High gods
 Lesser gods
 Demons and spirits
 Demi-gods
 Saints and incarnations
 Priests
 Rulers
 Merchants
 Craftsman castes
 Worker castes
 Service castes
 Outcastes
 High animals
 Low animals
 Plants

Now I have to admit, and don't you, when I saw those hierarchies of life put side by side, that the Indian culture's world view in one striking respect was closer to the Bible's than my own. The Bible, with all of its instruction concerning the world of angels and demons, of spirits in various orders -- think of angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim who must have their counterparts among the evil spirits, or think of Satan as the ruler his minions under him -- sounds closer to the Indian order in at least that respect. It may be deeply faulty in other respects, but in this one respect it unmasks a deep and pervasive unbelief on the part of western Christians. It is not an intentional unbelief, to be sure; it's not even a theoretical or theological unbelief; it is simply a failure to take seriously what the Bible so plainly says, a failure made more easy for us because our cultural has no thought of, no consciousness of the unseen world of spirits, it's never spoken of, it's never appealed to except in jest or in entertainment.

The Devil is a master deceiver. Some he holds in thrall by fear of his power; others by ignorance of his existence. In the western world he has committed the perfect crime: he has kidnapped an entire civilization and no one even realizes it! By encouraging a pervasive cultural silence regarding his kingdom and his work in the world, he is able to proceed with his destructive work without conscious opposition. No wonder Samuel Rutherford once wrote, "I love a rumbling, raging [Devil], rather than a subtle, sleepy Devil."

But here Paul reminds us that a fundamental purpose of the Lord's incarnation, death, and resurrection was the destruction of the power the kingdom of darkness had over us. We usually think almost exclusively of our sin and guilt and Christ's cross as our deliverance from sin and guilt, which absolutely it is. Our Westminster Standards, excellent as they are in so many ways, do not help us to fashion a biblical mind in this respect. They have little to say to us about evil spirits or the Lord's conquest of them on our behalf at the cross. 17th century British culture was much like ours in this respect. I'm sure many of you will admit that this is a weakness of your

conception of reality: a far too pale and colorless sight of the unseen kingdom. It's not vivid in your view.

You and I have adversaries in this world! We cannot see them, but they are there and they hate us and are doing their best to destroy us. They are cunning, powerful, and malevolent.

“Christian dost thou see them, on the holy ground,
How the powers of darkness rage thy steps around?

“Christian dost thou feel them, how they work within,
Striving, tempting, luring, goading into sin?

But we face them, because of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, as enemies that have been defeated, and not defeated only, but actually humiliated and that openly, as Paul says here.

“Christian, up and smite them, counting gain but loss,
In the strength that cometh, by the holy cross.”

“He that is in you is greater than he that is in the world.” Why? The first reason of course is that God is so much greater than the spirits whom he created; but still more because they have been defeated by Christ at the cross. He entered the strong man's house, as he once said he would, bound him, and stole his possessions. *We* were his possessions and Christ snatched them out of his hand, out of his kingdom, out of his grasp. In the ministry of the gospel Satan can be seen like lightning falling from heaven again and again.

It is in this sense that Satan suffered his most decisive and bitter defeat at the cross. If he could have somehow undermined the Lord's resolve as he attempted to do at the first great temptation, if he could somehow have tempted him to compromise his mission, if he could have duped him into some sin, any sin of thought word and deed, he would no longer have been the lamb without spot or blemish, no longer a sacrifice able to take away the sin of the world. If, by evil reports and stoking the rage of the religious leaders, he could have precipitated the crisis before the Lord was ready, Jesus might have been murdered in some quiet way and his body weighted and dumped in the Sea of Galilee, before he could die on the cross as atonement for the sin of the world. Satan entered Judas and led him to betray Jesus in one last, desperate attempt to frustrate his plan of salvation. Satan is not omniscient. He could not have known that he was, in fact, playing right into the hands of God and securing the Lord's death by judgment, by a judge however false the judgment, and by crucifixion, death by hanging on a tree, the ancient sign of a man cursed by God. If the Devil had defeated Christ before or on the cross, he would have remained our king and master forever and we would have remained his slaves. No one would ever escape his kingdom.

But the Lord Christ bested him at every turn and then plucked a multitude no man can number from his clutches by paying himself the price of their freedom himself, accepting in himself the punishment their sins required from the justice of God, that they might become the children of God instead of what they were: the children of the Devil.

This is my prayer for you and for myself this evening. That we might see ourselves as we were by our conception into a sinful nature, subjects of these very powers and authorities, children of the Devil as the Bible calls men and women who are still in their sins, however unaware we may have been or they may be of this bondage. That we could see ourselves shuffling through this world with devils filled, stumbling, heedless, unknowing toward that gate over which is written Dante's terrible inscription, "All Hope Abandon, Ye Who Enter Here." And all the while, invisible to us, evil spirits are ranged around us, delighting in every one of our moral failures, cackling at our spiritual stupor, our complete ignorance of our actual situation. That we could hear the rattle of our invisible chains and the groans of that death march. *And then* that we could see the devil and his evil spirits cowering in fear, shrinking in humiliation, as the King of Kings draws near and as the Prince of Life and Love clothes us in his own royal robes.

There was a tremendous victory at the cross. Indeed, victory is not a big enough word to describe what Paul calls here the disarming and the triumphing over the evil powers. Your freedom and mine from all of that malevolent and deadly interest was won in several ways at the cross, but this was crucial: the evil powers lost their grip on us and we were delivered into another kingdom and another family under the rule of another king. The war goes on, true enough, but the issue has already been determined. Ours is to live as victors in the battle with the unseen powers: confident, unafraid, and clear-headed.

Read Clausewitz and the other masters of the art of war. It is a cardinal principle you will find in all of those great works of strategy and tactics that generals must never reinforce failure or defeat. It's a great temptation on the battlefield and many otherwise effective generals have made the mistake; but you must never to reinforce failure. It is what Lee did at Gettysburg and what Grant did at Cold Harbor. When it is clear that you have lost and must lose, don't send more troops into the maw of that destruction to be consumed by the victor. Cut your losses and live to fight another day, counter attack somewhere else, but don't reinforce failure on the battlefield. *The devil has never learned this lesson.* He is impervious to it. It is ours to teach it to him; to rub his nose in it. When he comes against us with his temptations, cunning and beguiling as he may be, he is always reinforcing failure. Prove it to him. Show him and his minions that they have been disarmed and they will only suffer more humiliation if they come against you!

"...here's our point of rest;
 Though hard the battle seem,
 Our Captain stood the fiery test,
 And we shall stand through him."