

“That No One May Delude You”
Colossians 2:1-5
July 11, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We continue, this morning, in our series on Paul’s letter to the Colossians, as we come to Colossians 2:1-5.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Paul writes to the Colossian church:

^{2:1} For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, be gracious to us, your servants,
that we may live and keep your word.
Open our eyes, that we may behold
wondrous things out of your word.
Let your testimonies be our delight,
and our chief counselors.
We ask this in Jesus’s name. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:17-18, 24]

The Threat

Paul, in this paragraph tells us his goals for the Christians he is ministering to from a distance, and why he is pursuing those goals.

And it might be best for us to start with the why: why is Paul working towards the goals that he lists?

He answers that question in verse four – he says: “I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.”

Paul is concerned that others will come along, with arguments that are false, but that sound plausible, and they will pull the Colossian Christians away from their faith in Christ.

And we need to pause here and recognize that the threat Paul sees ... should feel very modern – very contemporary – to us. Or, to put it more accurately, our current challenges have a lot in common with the challenges these first-century Christians in Colossae faced.

In Paul’s day the Colossian Christians were surrounded by competing perspectives on ultimate reality. Douglas Moo puts it like this – he writes: Colossae’s “location on an important highway at a time of considerable mobility and the mixing of different ethnic groups that typified the Roman Empire meant that the population of Colossae was very diverse. A majority were undoubtedly Gentile, but we have good reason to think there was also a substantial number of Jews. [...] The diversity of population and exposure to the latest ideas via travelers on its major highway meant that Colossae was a place where many different religious and philosophical viewpoints thrived and probably mixed together.” [Moo, 26-27]

And so Paul knew that the Colossian Christians would have to deal with “plausible arguments” from those all around them who denied the central tenants of their faith in Christ.

In that way, the situation the Colossian Christians faced was a lot like the situation Christians face in the Western world today.

Today, like in the first century, there is no real societal consensus on ultimate reality, but a diversity and mixing of different viewpoints.

In his book *A Secular Age*, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor puts it like this – he says: “We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals [of reality], views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.” [Taylor, *Secular*, 11]

He goes on: “I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith.” Or, we might add, who have faith in a very different god than mine. Taylor goes on: “Belief in God,” or we might say, belief in the Christian God, “is no longer [self-evident to people]. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieu, it may be hard to sustain one’s faith.” [Taylor, *Secular*, 3]

Now, part of Taylor’s point is that this experience is almost universal in our culture. If you are a Christian, you experience this, because though you believe in the God presented in the Bible, you are surrounded by people you know, and in many ways respect, who have a wildly different view of reality than you do. Maybe their view is thoroughly secular or maybe they hold to a very

different view of God or spirituality. And though you don't hold their perspective, their very lives may make it seem at least somewhat plausible. And maybe their way of thinking, or their explanations do as well. And that plausible alternative always nags us even as we persevere in our faith in Christ.

As some have pointed out, the current condition of faith in a secular age is summed up by words of the man in Mark 9 who turns to Jesus and says, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

And so, the threat we face today is a lot like the one that the Colossian Christians faced. And so we should pay attention to Paul's solution to that threat.

That is true when it comes to the shape of the threat we face to our own faith. But it is also true of the threat we consider when we think of the faith of others. When we think of cultivating the faith in our children, this is the threat, we know, that looms, and we cannot hide our children from it forever. When we think of ministering to someone else – whether a friend, or family member, or fellow church-member – this is the threat we know they live their lives in, and there is no possible retreat – they need to learn to live in this context. For Christians in our lives, this is the threat we must consider, and it is the threat that Paul had in view as he wrote this paragraph to the Colossian Christians that is before us.

But ... we should note that as Taylor points out, this co-existing of doubt and faith is not limited to believers. It is true of just about everyone in our age. Everyone, whichever view they hold to, is aware of others they respect who hold a different view of ultimate reality. And so they too will be tempted to alternative forms of belief.

That is likely true of you if you are here today, and you are not a Christian. Something brought you here. Maybe you came because, despite your doubt, you are feeling that tug toward belief. Maybe you came because someone invited you or brought you, and even though you disagree with their views you couldn't simply dismiss their views or you couldn't dismiss them as people, and so here you are. Maybe it's something else. But whatever led you here, I suspect you have experienced some form of what Taylor describes. Whatever you believe, the alternatives – including the Christian alternative – may seem, at times, at least plausible. And you find yourself doubting your doubts.

Paul's response would be that such doubt of our doubts is good. Because the gospel of Jesus Christ is the true truth that explains the world we live in. And to help us see that, he lays out three things – three things that will help Christians persevere in their faith and resist plausible but false arguments against their faith, and three things that also confront non-Christians about the truth of and their need for the gospel.

So what are those three things that Paul is so concerned to establish in the Colossian Christians for the sake of their faith?

The Encouragement

The first thing, he says in verse two, is "that their hearts may be encouraged."

And it's easy to skip over this, but we really shouldn't.

Paul says that he is in the midst of a great struggle on behalf of the Christians in Colossae and Laodicea, and he lists three things he is struggling to produce in them, and the first one is "that their hearts may be encouraged."

We have ... I think ... a complicated relationship with encouragement.

Some of us desperately long for encouragement ... but we often long more for a false form of encouragement than for a true form of encouragement. We often long for flattery more than for real encouragement.

Sean DeMars draws this distinction. He explains that flattery is defined as "excessive and insincere praise, given especially to further one's own interests." And while, he says, people may or may not be seeking their own interests, it is still the case that "much of what passes for encouragement in our churches these days is flattery in disguise."

Let's face it. What we usually want is to be flattered. We don't want precise and accurate assessments of ourselves or our actions from others. We want to be told we are great. We want to receive positive statements from others, and we want them to be put really strongly, and we want them to be statements about us – us in and of ourselves. That is what we so often crave from other people.

But here's the thing – despite how much we long for flattery, we also know that it never really gives us what we hoped for. Its effects quickly fade. And in the end, we're left feeling unsatisfied.

I remember reading an author describe eating a fast-food meal this way. When he got his meal, the smell had him salivating, and he grew more and more anxious to eat his fast-food burger. And the first bite gave him a burst of flavor. But then, after that first bite, the appeal of it began to fade. He wondered if the reason we often eat fast food so quickly is because it's not really something to savor, and so even as we eat it, we are trying to capture what that original anticipation longed for. But we never quite get it. He writes "And so it goes, bite after bite, until you feel not satisfied exactly, but simply, regrettably, full." [Pollan, 114, 119]

Now maybe you do savor and feel satisfied by fast food burgers, so don't get caught up on the example.

But what he describes there is a lot like what flattery feels like. We long for it. We hunger for it. When we feel that it may be coming, we begin to anticipate it. And when we first hear it, we get a burst of enjoyment ... but more often than not, it quickly fades. We want more of it. We maybe even grasp at more of it. But it never really satisfies us. We end up feeling kind of disappointed. It never really gave us what we imagined.

Isn't that how it often feels?

And I think it often feels that way because we know that flattery is usually sort of empty. It's either insincere or it's inaccurate. Either they don't really mean it, and they're saying it because they want to be nice, or they want something from us, *or* even if they mean it, we know that however true the nice thing they say about us may be, it's always incomplete. We know ourselves. And we know that there are aspects of us that fall short – that are not what they should be. And we hope flattery will silence the voices that point out our failures and our selfishness and our sin ... but it never quite does.

Flattery usually doesn't do what we hope it will do.

Now, one common response to this is to say: “No, of course it doesn't. And you not only never should have looked to flattery to make you feel okay ... but you never should have looked to other people in the first place for how you think of yourself.”

This view says you don't need encouragement. All you need is self-confidence. This is the sort of rugged individualism that often comes out as a reaction against a society that seeks flattery. This is the alternative, individualistic response.

It's a kind of individualism that rejects altogether the idea of needing affirmation from others. You know who you are, and that is that – others are irrelevant to that. You don't need their input and you don't need their encouragement.

There is the tough-guy version of this – the stoic man who doesn't care what others think of him, who does his own thing, and who scorns both critiques as well as compliments and encouragement from others. And then there is the girl-power version of this, as a Disney princess sings “I don't care what they're going to say, let the storm rage on, the cold never bothered me anyway” And there's everything in-between and beyond that.

This is a very common perspective in our culture ... but it also misses the mark ... and we're seeing that play out in our culture right now.

Our culture has based itself in many ways on the idea of expressive individualism – the idea that we need to look inside, and we need to decide who we are on our own, and then we need to live that out our own way. We talked about this a few weeks ago. This popular view would seem to rule that input and encouragement from others is unnecessary to us.

But we are increasingly seeing that such a pattern is not actually livable for most of us.

In an interview on his recent book [on *Mere Fidelity*], Carl Trueman talked about Charles Taylor's essay “The Politics of Recognition.” And there is a lot in that essay, but one of the key points relates to what we're talking about now.

As a culture we have more and more claimed that our understanding of who we are is supposed to be a monologue. We decide who we are. We proclaim who we are. Others listen.

And we've tried that, as a culture. But it hasn't really worked. It turns out we're not made that way. We're not made to understand who we are in a monologue. We're made, instead, to understand who we are within a dialogue. We speak, and others respond. And the back-and-forth of how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us forms our self-understanding.

And the way we see this play out now in our culture is that as people pronounce their self-identity in our culture, they're not able to rest secure in it on their own. They need it to be affirmed by others. In fact, they demand it be affirmed by others. They need, in other words, to be encouraged in their self-understanding, if that self-understanding is to truly take root. And so we live in a culture where tolerance is no longer enough – but we need others to affirm us. [Taylor, "Politics", 229-231]

And that is increasingly true across the cultural spectrum, whatever demographic or tribe someone is a part of.

And that pattern reveals what one theologian describes from Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy's grammatical sociology: He explains that in terms of our self-understanding, we don't begin with the grammatical first person, but the grammatical second person. Long before we can say "I am" someone else addresses us, saying "you are". From our birth we are confronted by others. And we are wired not to form our identity independent of them, but to form it in dialogue with them. We need them. [Discussed in Leithart, 124]

So ... flattery will not work for us ... and neither will a rugged expressive individualism. So what is the answer? What will truly establish us so we can stand firm?

Paul's answer here is: encouragement, rooted in Christ.

First, we should note that Paul believes that the Christians he is writing to do need encouragement. Paul is struggling to encourage their hearts, so that they will stand firm. Encouragement is crucial, and Paul has a role in that. But the encouragement he is seeking to give them is rooted in Christ. And we know this because in this same paragraph he says that it is in Christ in which they are able to find all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

You see, flattery is all about us – it is about having others tell us that we are good, that we are fine, in and of ourselves. What makes true encouragement different is that it is not fundamentally about us, but as Sean DeMars puts it: "Encouragement is pointing out the grace of God in the lives of others." Encouragement is rooted in what God has done, and is doing, and will do.

So, while flattery seeks to praise the creature for his gifts, or her accomplishments, Christian encouragement looks at and praises what God has done in and through them. And that can take a number of forms.

Sometimes it is encouraging them to see God's work of creation in themselves: how he has made them, and how he has gifted them. Sometimes it is encouraging them to see God's work of growing, and maturing, and sanctifying them – pointing out their progress in the Christian life. Sometimes it is encouraging them in regard to God's gracious love towards them – that despite

their sin he has forgiven them, despite their shame he has adopted them as his son or daughter. Sometimes it is reminding them of what God will do – that one day he will make them fully new.

Compliments can be such encouragements, when they see what the other person is or has done as a sign of God at work, rather than when they are presented as flattery, which focuses on the creature without the creator.

And the thing about this kind of gospel encouragement is that it is solid. It can satisfy. It's not like flattery that always falls flat. Because this kind of encouragement is rooted in the work of Christ. And though we know our good deeds are "mixed with so much weakness and imperfection", we also know that they are made acceptable in Christ. [WCF 16.5-6] Though we may falter, Christ will remain solid. Though we may not be where we should be, Christ is working in us and growing us. And so, when others encourage us and affirm the work Christ is doing in us and through us, we can believe it, and we can grab hold of it, and we can find satisfaction in it, far more than we ever could from flattery or praise of us on our own. It helps us understand who we are as Christians.

And because we are wired to understand who we are in dialogue, we need this kind of gospel encouragement – we need, as Paul says, our hearts to be encouraged, if we are to resist the plausible arguments of the unbelieving world.

Now, at its heart, this encouragement comes from Christ himself. It is ultimately Christ, through his Word, who encourages us with his saving work, with the assurance that he is at work in us if we trust in him, and the promise of what he still will do for us.

But Christ does not leave us alone with the Bible. He gives us fellow believers. And often, it is through those fellow believers that he does his work of encouraging his people. And, in fact, that is exactly what we see here in our text.

Paul is at work to encourage them. Paul, the man, is the one through whom God is working to give this encouragement to the hearts of the Colossian Christians. He says that is what he is working to do in verses one and two, and then we see a small example of him doing it in verse five, where he says to them that he is "rejoicing to see [their] good order and the firmness of [their] faith in Christ."

In all this we see that encouragement in Christ is one of Paul's answers to how God's people are strengthened against being deluded by the plausible arguments of an unbelieving world.

Here's the question: Do we pay much attention to the importance of encouragement? Paul is struggling, he says in verse one, and toiling he says earlier in chapter one, to impart this encouragement to these Christians – that's how important he sees it being. Do we see it as important?

Begin with yourself. If you are a Christian, have you sought out fellow Christians in your life, to be, among other things, an encouragement to your heart? – to tell you what they see God doing in you and in your life? And if no, then why not?

Do you think you don't need it? Do you think you know better than Paul here? Have you replaced encouragement from others with seeking flattery instead? Or have you maybe sought to rely just on yourself? Paul doesn't tell the Colossian Christians to generate within themselves the encouragement they need – he instead seeks to give it to them in what he says. He knows that's how they need to receive it. And that is how we need to receive it as well.

Men can be especially bad with this. Anthony Bradley, a professor at The King's College in New York City has pointed out the pattern he sees in so many churches, where women have friends, and women's ministries form friendship groups. But men's programs assign them accountability partners and accountability groups instead. Now don't get me wrong, we all need accountability. But we need more than that. And that tendency in our churches reveals a whole lot of assumptions. Men need to be held accountable, it's true. So do women, for that matter. And both need encouragement from fellow Christians. They need friendships and other relationships that will provide that encouragement. Do you have such relationships? And if not, how can you begin to seek them out here?

But, of course, all this is not just about what we need. It's also about what others need from us. Those we minister to – those we are called to love – need encouragement too. That doesn't mean you need to throw a lot of flattery at people and tell them they are amazing all the time. It also usually doesn't mean just repeating general praise to them. Often, it means pointing out specific things to encourage them by. [DeMars] It means highlighting specific ways you see God working in them and growing them. It means acknowledging specific ways you are seeing that God has gifted them. It means reminding them of specific ways you see God is using them. The Christians in your life need that from you. And if you want them to stand firm against a world that will assault their faith, then you need to give them that sort of gospel encouragement. Your wife or your husband needs that from you. Your Christian friend needs that from you. The volunteer you are working alongside in ministry needs that from you. The person you are mentoring in the faith needs that from you. And especially, if you have them, your children need that from you.

It is much easier to admonish our children for what they are doing wrong than it is to intentionally encourage them about ways we see them growing and the ways we see God at work in them. I know, because I'm a parent – and, to my shame, I'm much better at rebuking than encouraging. And sometimes we can even pat ourselves on the back for this. We can equate harsher parenting with being more serious about the Lord, or with better preparing our children to follow the Lord. But Paul here says that a key way of preparing a Christian to stand against the assaults of the world, is to work – to toil and struggle – in your efforts to encourage their hearts. And, Christian parents, you don't know how to do ministry better than the Apostle Paul does.

This doesn't mean we take sin lightly, or that we heap flattery on our children. But it does mean that part of our job is forming their self-understanding as God's children – as little ones who belong to God, and whom God is at work in, and whom God loves – and we do this by encouraging their hearts, by reminding them that they are his, that he loves them, and by pointing out the concrete ways we see him at work in them. They need to hear that from us. Their hearts

need to be encouraged, so that they will not be deluded by plausible arguments of an unbelieving world.

We need such encouragement because it is, for us, evidence of the truth of the gospel. We need help seeing Christ's work in us. We need help seeing his forgiveness of us. But seeing that dynamic in our lives also serves as further proof of the truth of the gospel, and Christ's presence with us.

And if you are not a Christian, then part of what you need to see is that true encouragement is found nowhere else. There is nowhere else solid that can serve as its foundation. You cannot trust yourself – for you know your own weaknesses and failures. You cannot place your ultimate trust in others, for they cannot bear that weight either. Only God, revealed in Jesus Christ, can bear the weight of the kind of encouragement we need – encouragement that is solid ... encouragement that is sure. Only Christ will love us not because we deserve it, but from his perfect mercy and love. Only Christ can provide the encouragement that will sustain our souls.

And so, if we are to survive the assaults of the world, the first thing we need is for our hearts to be encouraged in Christ, as Christ works through his people to provide encouragement to us.

The second and third thing we see here, are both related to that.

The Community

The second thing we see here – the second goal Paul has to help the Colossians stand strong, is Christian community. He says that in verse two as well. There he says that the second thing he is struggling for is that they – the Christian community in Colossae – would be “knit together in love.”

Here we see that Paul's struggle is not to give each person the encouragement they need in Christ by doing it all himself. His struggle is to see them knit together into a Christian community that provides the encouragement, and the support, and the strength they need to withstand the challenges they will face to their faith.

Paul here not only wants to see the church in Colossae formed as an institution, or as a place with great preaching, or excellent liturgy, or wonderful programs, or spot-on theology. Paul wants to see the church in Colossae become a Christian congregation that is knit together in love. Think of that analogy: knit together. People's lives are to become intertwined with one another's lives, stitch by stitch. And each stitch is to be a stitch of love. The result is a detailed, interlocking, interwoven unity, bound together by a complex network of love. That is the kind of the community we are supposed to be.

And Paul here tells us that that's the community we're supposed to be not only because it encourages us, not only because it is beautiful, not only because it is in and of itself good – though all those things are true. Paul says that that's the kind of community we are supposed to

be because it is that kind of community that will keep us, and others in our congregation, from being deluded by false but plausible-sounding arguments.

And once again, that is the case not only because community in general strengthens – though it does. It is the case for the church because it is in the church – in that network of love – that Christ is especially at work. And in Christ, Paul says, are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Only Christian community – only community built on Christ can provide this. Because human love is not enough. Human love falls short. And so every community outside of Christ has its limits on how deeply it can be knit together, and how strongly it can be knit together. But the Church is strengthened by the power of Christ. And the Church is enabled, by grace, to love with the love of Christ. And so the Church can be knit together in love, and support its people, like no other community.

This is God’s gift to us, and another key way for us to be strengthened and encouraged in our faith. And yet ... we often resist it. We often opt out of it. Or we often fail to pursue it. Why is that?

In that interview I mentioned earlier, Carl Truman says “It seems to me that all of the thinkers I look at in [my] book [...] are wrestling with a two-fold problem – with two problems that are not immediately compatible. One is: we all intuitively want to be free – we want to be free agents of our own destiny. On the other hand we also want to belong. And it’s not easy to tie together freedom and belonging. [...] [And] we’re so trapped within this framework.” he says. [*Mere Fidelity*]

You know that you want deep community. You know that you need it in order to be strengthened in your faith. But you resist it. Because being knit together to others means losing some of your autonomy. It means giving up your rights and sacrificing some of your freedom. It means granting others a claim on you. And most of us resist that.

But that is what we need. And that is what the Body of Christ is supposed to be, in order to strengthen God’s people.

If you are a Christian, then you need it. If you have other Christians in their life, then they need it. One of your chief concerns for your own spiritual life, and for the spiritual life of your spouse, and your friend, and your child, should be: are you, and are they, being knit together with other Christians in love? That will cost something. But it is worth the cost.

So, in order to help the Colossian Christians stand firm in their faith, Paul struggles and toils first to encourage their hearts, second to have them knit together in love as a community.

The True Riches

And third and finally, we see that Paul’s work is also for them to see that all they receive, in these settings and in any other, is from Christ.

He writes in verses two and three that he is struggling so that they would “reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

What we are talking about – the strength of faith we need (and more) – isn’t found in encouragement in itself ... it isn’t found in “community” itself ... it is found in Christ, and received through Christian community and encouragement.

We’ve said that already, but that fact is at the heart of this passage, and so it is worth repeating.

Paul writes that the riches of full assurance and understanding, and all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are “hidden” in Christ.

The idea is not that you need to go looking for it but that it is safe and secure – people used to hide treasure in order to secure it. These things have been secured in Christ. And now, in him, you can access them. [Moo, 171] And you access them through the ordinary means of grace he has provided: his word, the sacraments, the prayers, and the relationships within his Church.

N.T. Wright says this – he writes: “Christ himself *is* ‘the mystery of God’: not just a clue or a key to it, as though it were something other than himself, a proposition which, however true, remained abstract. Everything we might want to ask about God and his purpose can and must now be answered – this is the force of the verse – with reference to the crucified and risen Jesus, the Messiah.”

Wright explains: “This is both a comfort and a challenge to Christians. They do not need to look for wisdom or knowledge elsewhere than to the one they already possess, but at the same time they have a long way to go if they are to explore and make their own the rich inheritance they have entered into” in Christ. [Wright, 99]

This means, that if you are not a Christian, then the riches of knowledge – the ability to understand this strange world that you live in – it can come from nowhere else than from Christ himself. In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

It means that if you are a Christian, then what you most need, what your fellow-Christians most need, what your family and what your children most need is not a new technique, it’s not a better behavioral system, it’s not a set of talking points to deploy against opposing arguments – all of those things may have their place, but none of them are the key thing you need. The key thing you need is to go deeper with Christ himself: to draw closer in prayer, and his word, and his worship, but also, as Paul highlights here, to draw closer to him through his people.

Yet often, instead of going deeper with Christ, we look to someone or something else to help us feel safe and secure and like we understand the world. But Paul reminds us that it is only in Christ that we find all the treasure of wisdom and understanding.

And so, so that no one may delude us with plausible, but false, arguments, let us turn to Jesus and find in him all the riches of full assurance of understanding and knowledge of God – all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And clinging to Christ, let us be knit together in love. And let us give encouragement to one another, and receive encouragement from one another. For that is what our Lord has provided for us. And it will see us through the challenges that lie ahead.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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