

The Core

Don't Let Go of the Gospel

Colossians 1:21-23

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And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister (Col. 1:21-23).

In our basement, there's a memorial to a moment that lives in infamy in our family. My parents lived on a lake in southern Michigan, and it has been a right of a passage for me to teach each of our boys how to water-ski. I have many fond memories of floating alone in the middle of the lake, watching my kids take off after I held their skis under water.

The twins learned to ski when they were six years old. Jeremiah was always trying to keep up with his older brothers, and he usually did a pretty good job of it. The summer the twins learned to ski, he was insistent that he try too—even though he was only three years old. So, rather than having an argument with him, we put skis on his little feet and decided to let him try.

But before I ever let my kids ski, I gave them this speech: "The most important thing to remember is that when you fall you have to let go of the rope." I've seen way too many people eat serious water because they panicked and held the rope too long.

I told Jeremiah this because I was sure there was no way that a three-year-old was going to do anything but be pulled up and fall right back down into the water. Really, he was still just a baby. Well, Jeremiah shocked us all! My dad said, "Hit it," Jeremiah popped out of the water, and at three years of age he was water-skiing. And I was celebrating! "Way to go, Jeremiah! Hang on buddy! Don't forget to let go of the rope if you fall!"

When you water-ski, you must remember to let go of the rope if you fall. A key to successful water-skiing is to let go. When it comes to the gospel, it is the exact opposite—never let go of the gospel.

Chapter 1 connects our lives to the centrality of Christ. We've been exploring how to understand that Jesus is the core and that we need to deal with it. Our passage this morning draws this idea to a close by bringing us back to the gospel and reminding us to never let go.

You see, that was the temptation for the church in Colossae—to slowly drift from the centrality of Christ and his gospel. And to be sure that we don't do that, I'd like to exhort you to (1) don't forget and (2) don't let go.

Don't Forget! (vv. 21-22)

Verses 21-22 are a reminder of why the gospel is incredibly important. The word "gospel" means good news. It is a single word used to capture the good news that Jesus Christ died on the cross to make a substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. The gospel is the message that God, through Jesus's death, can forgive you of your sins and make you a new creature. Therefore, the most important decision you can ever make is the one in which you admit that you are a sinner and throw yourself on Christ, asking him to be your Savior and Lord.

Strange as it may seem, over time we can begin to forget the amazing reality of what God did in that moment. Somehow Jesus can become too common, too familiar, and we might live as though we have forgotten the miracle that happened to us. Therefore, Paul tells them (and us) that we should not forget our past, the price, or the purpose of the gospel. And it is good for our hearts to rehearse these things.

The past

There is something valuable and right about a balanced view of your past. It is too easy for us to forget how bad our spiritual condition was before we met Jesus. Certainly, we should not be captive to the past and allow it to control us in the present, but we should also never forget what we were delivered from. Therefore, it is helpful for Paul to remind us of our past.

First, the problem was our alienated and hostile disposition. The text says that the problem was with our mind ("alienated and hostile in mind"). This word for mind (*dianoia*) means much more than just your brain or what you think about. It refers to the way that you think or the intention of your life. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the translators used the word "mind" to describe the heart. You could think of it like a disposition or a bent of your will.

The text tells us that our natural bent or disposition was alienated and hostile. To be alienated means that there is a barrier between God and you. It means that you don't belong, you don't fit, and it isn't natural for you to be where you are. But it is even worse because we are also described as hostile, which means that you are an enemy, hateful, and opposed to God (see also Rom. 5:10; Eph. 2:14,16). In other words, everyone's past is exactly the same—we all started as enemies of God. The heart of every man and woman is set against God. There is no one who is neutral.

Secondly, we expressed that rebellion by taking up specific sins. That is why the text says, "doing evil deeds." The evil deeds were a product of an alienated and hostile disposition toward God. So, sins like lust, greed, immorality, drunkenness, and covetousness are much more than just sins that violate God's law. They are weapons of our rebellious warfare; they are the declaration that we will not be ruled by

God! You see, lust wasn't just your problem; rather, lust was the arms that you took up against God. C.S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, stated it this way: "Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement. He is a rebel who needs to lay down his arms."

The worst sin we've ever committed is not the biggest problem. That sin was merely the outward expression of something far worse—a heart set against God. And it is important to never forget what God saved you from: he saved you from yourself!

The effect of this, when the gospel is central, is humility. When you get the gospel right and when you understand that nature of your sin, it creates a humble posture. One of the ways you know that you're starting to lose the centrality of the gospel in your life, or in your church, is that humility is strangely absent.

The price

We also must not forget the price of the gospel. Namely, that it was Christ's suffering death that created the possibility of reconciliation between God and his human enemies. We see the price emphasized by two more words: flesh and death. To bring reconciliation between God and mankind, Jesus hung between heaven and earth, absorbing the wrath of God so that God's justice could be satisfied and we could be forgiven.

So, there are two things that should motivate you to not forget: the despicable nature of your rebellion against God and the indescribable worth of the Son of God, who was murdered to bring you back. We must not forget these things!

The purpose

Finally, we see a reminder regarding the purpose of the gospel. Whenever you see words like "in order that" in the Bible, you ought to know that a purpose statement is coming. Verse 22 captures the purpose of redemption with this glorious, grace-filled statement: ". . . in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him" So, this is the goal, the purpose, the endgame of the gospel: to present you as something that you would never be without Jesus.

So, it is good to remember where you've come from, but it is also good to be reminded about what your future holds. There will come a day when we will all stand before God (Rom. 14:10, 8:1, 8:33), our day in court before the holy gaze of the Lord. On that day there will be no swearing to tell the truth because you will not need to testify. There will be no discovery hearing, no motions, no depositions, and no lies because God knows everything! Can you imagine?

Well, the aim of the gospel is to prepare you for the day when you meet God face-to-face. The gospel changes your standing before God such that even though you were God's enemy and involved in the

heart-based insurrection against him, you are declared holy (morally pure), blameless (free from every fault), and above reproach (guiltless).

What happened to you was scandalous! So, it should be no surprise to you that Paul uses this Greek word to describe the work of the cross: *skandalon* (see Rom. 9:33, 11:9; 1 Pet. 2:8). And what an appropriate word to use! God calls you morally pure, faultless, and guiltless. It is a scandal of grace for him to say this about you! Don't forget that!

Don't Let Go! (v. 23)

Verse 23 brings Paul's point to a sharp and clear conclusion: Don't let go of the gospel. Everything he just said in verses 21-22 is now focused on this final exhortation and warning.

Here we have an important warning passage written to believers about the perils of falling away. That raises some questions, doesn't it? For instance, does Paul think that these people could lose their reconciliation? Does he think that it is possible for a believer to permanently fall away? Why does he make the reconciliation of verses 21-22 seem to be conditional? How does this fit with other passages that clearly teach the security of the believer or the perseverance of the saints?

It seems to me that there are three things that frame our thinking on this:

1. It is clear to me that the Bible teaches that those who genuinely receive Christ are eternally secure (often said this way: "Once saved, always saved.") since God is the one who does the work of justification (Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1:1-14, 2:8-10).
2. Those who are genuinely saved persevere to the end (called the perseverance of the saints). In other words, while they are not perfect, their faith in Christ remains because they have been born again by God and they are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (John 10:28; 1 Pet. 1:8-9, 23).
3. God frequently gives warnings to those who he knows will persevere as a means of motivating them and cautioning them to remain vigilant. In other words, the warning serves as a vehicle to guard them from doing what the warning suggests. Charles Spurgeon wrestled with this and gave the following counsel:

"But what if those cautions are the means in the hand of God of keeping His people from wandering? What if they are used to excite a holy fear in the minds of His children, and so become the means of preventing the evil which they denounce."¹

¹ The Final Perseverance of the Saints - Job 17:9 from Spurgeon's Sermons, Electronic Database. Copyright © 1997, 2003, 2006 by Biblesoft, Inc.

My favorite verse to show you this is Hebrews 6:9 where the writer, after giving one of the sternest and scariest warning passages in all of the Bible (Heb. 6:1-8) says, “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.”

I know this as a father because, when they were young, I would often warn my kids with an extreme example to make a point. “Careful where you point that airsoft gun because you don’t want to shoot someone’s eye out.” “Don’t make that face too much or it might stay that way.”

4. This approach (warning about what you won’t do) is further verified by the language of verse 23, where “If you” can also be translated as “provided that,” and it does not necessarily express doubt. The tone of the Greek language is expressing confidence: “. . . at any rate if you stand firm in the faith—and I am sure that you will.”² The same thought is expressed in 2:5, “. . . rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.”

Therefore, the admonition here to not let go of the gospel needs to be seen for what it is: a powerful warning meant to motivate us to cling passionately to the core of our faith. Notice that the verse is a clear call to not lose hope in the gospel, something that had come to them through Paul and his ministry. Therefore, he calls them to the following:

- To continue—to a life marked by a perseverant trust in the gospel. The danger of drifting from the gospel needed to be resisted at all costs!³
- To be stable and steadfast—two words that are related to the idea of the foundation of a house, something very solid and sure (see Matt. 7:24-27). There are two texts that shed some further light on this idea of the gospel being the key to steadfastness:

. . . if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:57-58).

The church is a pillar and buttress (a form of steadfast) of truth because the gospel is at its heart. When the church loses focus on the gospel, she loses her power to speak the truth! Further, individual believers are called to live in light of the power of the gospel. They are to be steadfast in the gospel while continuing in their service for Christ.

² Peter O’Brien. Colossians and Philemon: Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, Texas: Word Publishers, 1982. p. 69.

³ Paul uses the same word in Rom 6:1, 11:22, 23, 1 Tim 4:16

Therefore, I want to call you today to not let go of the gospel—the simple message that Jesus came to save sinners, of whom I am chief (1 Tim. 1:15). Here’s how you can do that:

- Rehearse the gospel often! Keep the Main One (Jesus) the main thing. The gospel is so much more than just knowing you are going to heaven. It is the message that Jesus can make the enemies of God his friends.
- Use your past; don’t let it use you. Use it to glorify God. Don’t glory in it; don’t magnify it. But don’t forget it. Remember where you were and rejoice in what God has done in you. Every now and then I see this on a bumper sticker or T-shirt: “When Satan reminds you about your past; remind him about his future.” But I’d rather say, “When Satan reminds you about your past; remind your heart about the gospel.”
- Learn to connect life to the gospel. Don’t separate trusting Jesus in the details of life from the beauty and the power of the gospel. Keep going back to the foundation of your hope. Namely, that Jesus is worthy of your trust. Trust him to help you be victorious over a sin. Trust him to love your spouse. Trust that he’s got a good plan for your life. Trust that his timing is perfect. All of this is grounded in the gospel.
- When you are tempted to quit, cling to the gospel. The hope of the gospel is a firm safety line in the midst of hard times and storms. Come back to the truth that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).

We once took our kids to the Children’s Museum in Indianapolis. Part of the visit included the climbing wall. My kids loved climbing walls, and, frankly, they were much better at it than I would have been. Well, part of the climbing wall experience involved me holding and securing the safety line. As they climbed up, I sat on the floor pulling up the slack in the line. As they began to climb, I noticed that the safety line was not only for safety, it was also for confidence. As they would reach for a hard rock, they would look back and say, “Do you got me, Dad?” And I would pull the rope tighter. The feeling of a tighter rope gave them confidence to push forward to the next rock, and then Savannah, Mom, and I would cheer! “Get the next one. I’ve got you covered,” I would shout. The assurance that the safety rope was tight gave them hope for the next rock.

And some of you need to hear this simple word from God today: “The gospel has got you covered. Reach for the next rock!” College Park, don’t let go of the gospel!

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