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Welcome back! This week at Magdalen Road church we started our autumn series in Paul's letter to the Colossians. We will be in this letter through to November and so I encourage you to read the entire letter as part of your first homegroup.

In the sermon we tried to get a birds eye view and so explored a number of broad threads and themes that we'll see through the letter. We began by considering the desire for growth and maturity that seems to be at the heart of the letter (see Paul's opening section and prayer (v6 and v10)). The Colossians wanted to grow up as Christians - the problem was they were looking for that growth in the wrong places. Paul was concerned for them they have been taken captive by hollow and deceptive philosophy (2v8) that has shipwrecked their faith rather than made them grow.

We noted that the fundamental desire for growth as Christians is a really good thing. Who doesn't want to grow in maturity and Christ likeness?! The problem for the Colossians was that they were looking to the spiritual vibe of the age for their maturity rather than Christ - they were particularly concerned with what they knew and what they did and in spiritual experiences. It was likely that travelling false teachers had brought these ideas to the area. These are not simply Colossian issues that are very much alive and well in 21st-century Oxford today.

For example there is a theme of wisdom, knowledge and understanding (1v9-10, 1v28, 2v3, 3v10 etc). Coupled with that there is an emphasis on what must be done (2v11, 16, 20-22). Note for them the issue seemed to be a looking back to a Jewish understanding of circumcision, feasts and festivals as well as a harsh treatment of the body leading to strange religious experiences (2v18). Again though they all focus on what you do rather than looking to Christ and recognising who he is and what he's done.

Chapter 2 verses 6&7 sit at the heart of the letter - Paul urges them rather than looking elsewhere for maturity to be rooted in the Lord Jesus. They don't need a new or exciting philosophy, rather than need to grasp more of who he is and the glorious beauty of the gospel as being sufficient for their growth. It's striking that Paul urges them throughout the letter to be thankful (1v12, 2v7, 5v15, v17, 4v2). Presumably this is because we are only really thankful when we really grasp what it is we have to be thankful for.

We said this was a little like the 'proverbial antiques road show scenario' when someone takes an old family heirloom that's been gathering dust and the experts tell them how much it is worth. What had been there for many years but 'gathering dust' has been discounted and overlooked.

The reality was this is something that would change their lives forever. Paul says it is a bit like the gospel- it seems the Colossians believed that it was simply a starter - sufficient for salvation but not for growth in maturity. Paul says 'no no no Jesus and his glorious gospel is all you need- he is the way in and the way on in the Christian life'.

But we're certainly not immune to this way of thinking - do we sometimes think that there must be more to the Christian life than this? Maybe we became Christians 10, 15, 20 or 25 years ago and we're still struggling with self-centredness as we did at the start. Are we ever tempted to look elsewhere for a silver bullet that will solve problems and fast-track our growth? The message of Colossians is, the answer does not lie in something extra or new, but rather in a better grasp of all that we have in Christ - we have fullness in him. This idea of fullness is another theme that weaves through (1v19, v25, 2v2, v9).

The second half of the letter - chapters 3 and 4 largely deal with more practical lifestyle issues. The BIG danger though is that we can easily divorce them from the first half. We can slip into thinking that chapters 1 and 2 was all about theology, and chapters 3 and 4 is all about application. However we'll see that as Paul gets down to application on the nitty-gritty of the Christian life, again and again and again it is rooted in the gospel that he's explained in the first half. For example as he deals with slaves and masters at the end of chapter 3 the motivation for godly living is founded upon all that Jesus has done for them.

Paul simply won't allow us to believe that the person and work of Jesus is hypothetical or simply theological rather profoundly practical impacting relationships and every scenario of life.

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Here are some starter questions for your group. As always feel free to adapt them depending on who you have in the room.

As we are just getting to grips with the letter feel free not to cover every base but rather to begin to get a bigger picture of what's going on, why Paul was writing and of how it fits together.

Read the entire letter if you can and note number of the themes already mentioned. Try and summarise what the letter says about them.

For example

1. wisdom and knowledge
2. fullness
3. thankfulness

How does the problems in Colossae mirror wrong thinking in our day too?

Are you a thankful Christian? Why? Why not? How do you think Paul would encourage us to be more thankful?

When are we in danger of shrinking Jesus? When are we in danger of looking elsewhere for our maturity? What examples of things are there with the books or conferences or churches or spiritual techniques rather than simply digging deeper into the gospel of the Lord Jesus?

What is the big danger if you divorce chapters 3 and 4 from chapters 1 and 2? How does the theology in the first half impact application and lifestyle in the second half? Give some examples.