



+ This Sunday at Magdalen Road Church we continued our studies in Paul's letter to the Colossians (2v16-3v4).

We began a time by considering two scenarios:

1. We imagined we were an inmate who had recently been released from prison having been incarcerated for over a decade. How does the prisoner now live? When the prison bell rings he expects to be fed, but is now free. What does life look like for someone who is now free? How can he learn to live as a free man?
2. We imagined we were someone who had been injured in a game of football. We had learnt to limp and so even after consultations, an operation and even physio were still not walking properly. Why? Because unlearning a limp is very hard to do.

Both of those scenarios are a bit like our situation as believers. We are a people wrestling with who we are now as Christians, wrestling with how to live in a new identities of being 'in Christ' as we saw last week. Even though we are new, we still struggle and live as if we were not new. Muscle memory is very hard to rewire.

In the passage for this morning in chapter 2 Paul show us three dead ends that the Colossians have taken for how to grow as a Christian. And then in chapter 3 he begins to show the answer for us growing as believers.

Don't be fooled: remember to weigh their claims in the light of Christ (2:16-23)

1. Don't let anyone judge you
v16-17. Certain ideas, it seems, are being peddled stating that you must keep various aspects of the Jewish Law relating to diets and days. Regarding diets perhaps they were looking at different aspects of the Jewish food law (eg Lev 11 etc) and forgetting the words of Jesus from Mark 7. It's what is within someone's heart that makes a person unclean, rather than particular foods. Regarding days it seems they're being judged for not keeping certain days or celebrations or Sabbaths.

Paul's response is (v17) that these things were only a shadow - the reality is found in Christ. Jesus was the main event. Why would you go back to the shadow when you have the reality?

2. Don't let them disqualify you
The language in this section seems to be of 'otherworldly spiritual experience'. For those not experiencing these things they are being looked down upon and perhaps seen as not even 'in the race'. Paul's initial diagnosis of those teaching this is that they are puffed up and proud. They may talk in humble ways but actually it's all about them. Paul second diagnosis v19 is that they have lost connection with the head-and so are not actually of Christ.

We need to ask questions and be discerning about all spiritual experience. A good question to ask must be am I left with a greater love for Christ? Or has he been eclipsed by something or someone else? Is this really

about Jesus who is it really about them?

3. Don't let them enslave you
These things are all about what they do-taste-touch-handle. Paul describes the rules as being 'from the world' v20 and v22. They have an appearance of wisdom but foundationally they all come down to rules. Paul reminds them that have died with Christ, they are no longer of this world, and so the methods of the world will not work to help them grow in Christ-likeness.

Someone once said 'when Christians want to be more committed they make more rules for themselves'. We thought a little bit about John Piper's Sermon- 'flesh tanks and peashooter regulations'. The way that we naturally are legalists and use rules to help us fight the flesh when we want to deal with sin... But those rules are like peashooters. They do not work.

Don't be forgetful: remember you have been raised with Christ (3:1-4)

Paul does not have a silver bullet for us to help us grow but rather to set our focus on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, and where we are joined to him by faith. We are to set our foundational focus of hearts and minds on Christ where our life is now hidden and will one day be seen as he returns in glory.

3v1 is the flipside of 2v20. We have been raised with Christ because we have died with Christ. Paul is speaking of a fundamental tension of what it means to live as a Christian. We are simultaneously, the Bible says, in Christ and also in Oxford (or wherever we may live). We might say that in principle now we are at the right hand of the father, when we die we will be there in practice.

A fundamental battle in the Christian life is for us to better remember and live in the light of our new identity rather than the old. Our problem is when the bell rings we still think it's dinnertime, we limp because our body has learnt to limp. That is the old us. We listen to the old us.

When was the last time we genuinely set our focus on Christ who is seated at the right hand of the father? Maybe that is why we struggle so much and often end up living mediocre Christian lives. To see genuine change, we need to change how we think - we need to change the focus of our hearts and our lives. Our problem is the earthly nature and the world around us are so enticing and we are so forgetful that our focus is not on Christ and a new identity in him as it ought to be.

The big reminder from me this week has been to be more proactive as to where my life is focused, how proactive are we at deliberately setting hearts and minds on things above? What would it look like to remember him at 'that' point in our project where we would normally get it wrong? To remember all The fullness we have in him? To remember that he loves us? That he is powerful? That this world is not all there is? And that one day he will return in glory? To increasingly become who we are now in Christ, that needs to increasingly become our focus.

Here are some questions for your group: as always please feel free to adapt for your context as needed.

- Have you remembered your project from last week? How has it gone this last week?
- In this section of the letter (2v16-23) to the Colossians Paul gives three dead ends when it comes to spiritual growth. What are they? Why are they attractive? How do we see them in our world today?
- What rules have you been tempted to keep? What is the difference between a healthy habit and a rule?
- How does Paul shine the light of Christ onto each of these dead ends?
- How does Paul describe the idea of rules? Why will they not work ultimately?
- In chapter 3v1-4 What foundational answer does Paul give for how we can grow in Christ likeness? What does this practically mean?
- Is this something that we are good at? Why or why not? Why are we so drawn to rules instead?
- How can we help each other to grow in this?