

**SOUL CARE – A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS**  
**COLOSSIANS 1**  
**March 4, 2018**  
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Introduction to Colossians and Soul Care Practices: Christ is enough!

Gabe has asked me to kick off the new series on the book of Colossians. He'll be back next Sunday and will be spending the next weeks leading up to Easter in Colossians. One of the primary messages of Colossians is that Christ is enough. We don't need esoteric knowledge given only to a few. We don't need to complicate our relationship with God by adding tons of rules. If we have Christ, we have everything.

The message is simple but not necessarily easy. Christ is enough. But how do we fill our lives with Christ? How can we, as Paul writes in chapter 1, be filled "with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light"? The message is simple but not easy.

With Gabe gone, I thought I should stick to safe subjects and avoid anything controversial. So let's talk about gun control, immigration and your political party. Anyone have strong feelings on those subjects? (Don't raise your hands!) As you think about those issues, ask yourself: how closely is this tied to your identity? What would be necessary for you to change your mind on this subject? For most of us, what we believe to be true in areas like gun control, immigration or our political party is also closely tied to our own identity and sense of belonging. What would make you change your mind?

It's been said, "A man with a conviction is a hard man to change. Tell him you disagree and he turns away. Show him facts or figures and he questions your sources. Appeal to logic and he fails to see your point. Suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before." Taken from *When Prophecy Fails*.

Do you know when that was written? In 1957. But of course that is an old fashioned belief, right? Here's an article from *The Atlantic* written last year:

**This Article Won't Change Your Mind – why facts don't change beliefs**

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/03/this-article-wont-change-your-mind/519093/>

The article begins in this way, "I remember looking at her and thinking, 'She's totally lying.' At the same time, I remember something in my mind saying, 'And that doesn't matter.'"

There are facts, there are beliefs and there are things you want so badly to believe that they become as facts to you.

We tend to see evidence that disagrees with our beliefs as weaker. Often this is because we're asking different questions when evaluating that evidence depending on whether we want to believe what it suggests or not. When the evidence supports our beliefs, we ask ourselves "Can I believe this?" When the evidence points to a contrary position, we ask, "Must I believe this?"

When I was in grad school, I became enamored with the work of the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. I loved his theory of communicative competence. He talks about the unforced force of the better argument. Argument here does not mean arguing over who takes out the trash, but rather a carefully thought-out reasoning. Habermas says that in discourse (in conversation) the unforced force (the power) of the better argument prevails. I truly believed a well-reasoned logical statement could change deeply held beliefs, that the power of the better argument would change minds. Boy, was I wrong! Facts alone do not change beliefs.

As you thought about your beliefs on gun control, immigration and your political affiliation, were you able to identify anything that would change your mind on those issues? No?

Let's look at Paul, the author of Colossians.

How did Saul, a rigidly observant Jew, persecuting Christ-followers with violence, become the apostle Paul who writes with such love and encouragement to these new Christians? Here is how Paul describes himself: he was "advancing in Judaism beyond many of his own age among his people, so extremely zealous...for the traditions of his fathers" (Gal. 1:14). He "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal. 1:13). He was blameless in his observance of the Law (Phil. 3), and he belonged to the "strictest sect" of rabbinic Judaism (Acts 26:5).

So what happened? What changed his mind about the very foundation he had built his life upon? About his very identity and his faith?



Caravaggio's Conversion of Paul on the Road to Damascus

Acts 9 says that Saul "was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Caravaggio has captured the moment when Paul has been thrown from his horse. He lies on his back, blinded, vulnerable. The hoofs of his horse are tangled up with his limbs. He’s helpless. He’s transformed...not in a moment but over the course of several years.

What allowed him to move from fanatical focus on law keeping, killing followers of Jesus, to addressing them with love? What might have changed in his understanding of the nature and character of God? How did Paul’s understanding of caring for his soul care change with his conversion?

As an observant Jew, he had zealously obeyed the law and the rabbinic teachings. He was righteous according to the law, but his righteousness was externally focused. It was based on his adherence to the law rather than to any saving work of Jesus Christ. We know what Jesus thought of those who obeyed the letter of the law but lacked grace, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27).

We must understand that, for the Pharisees, their righteousness was of the highest importance to them. They were committed to following God in a way that many of us are not prepared to do. They were committed to obeying the 613 laws necessary to be righteous. However, here’s the thing about their view of righteousness, it was external. Their righteousness consisted in control over external actions. Jesus had a different message. Jesus teaches that we must go beyond the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:20). Jesus speaks of external changes brought about by an inward transformation. It’s about relationship...not rules and not arguments.

When we look at Paul’s life, we see that Relationship, not persuasive argument, changed everything he had believed.

One way of describing our relationship with Jesus is how Paul phrases it in Colossians 2:7, we are to be “rooted in Christ.” But it is difficult to be rooted if we keep pulling up our roots. We need to let our roots go deep into the well of God’s love. If we are to grow in Christ, we must do so in our inner being. We must nourish our “with God” life, the life of the spirit, our interior life.

Guigo 1 [Ga-E-go] a 12<sup>th</sup> century monk and one who had great influence on Bernard of Clairvaux, wrote, “It is your lack of interior pleasures that makes you go looking for exterior ones.” St. Ignatius defined sin as “disordered attachment,” those areas where our heart longs for things other than God. What draws us away from God are not the external things. They first manifest in our interior life. Soul care practices can help us develop a rich interior life, nourishing our “with God” life. Soul care practices give us tools to examine our life, looking for moments in our day when we move towards God or away from him.

Soul care practices (sometimes called spiritual disciplines) can help us develop our “with God” life. Soul care practices give us the tools we need to help us abide in Christ. Soul care practices do not save us. Soul care practices or spiritual disciplines do not make us righteous or holy. We are not replacing the Mosaic Law with a new set of laws. Christ is our redeemer, and as Paul stresses in Colossians, Christ is enough! As we spend the next month in Colossians, we are going to look at different approaches to soul care. Because each of us has been created uniquely, a soul care practice that feeds my soul may not resonate with you and vice versa. We’ll provide several options for you to consider over the next few weeks. And if you don’t hear one that speaks to you, give me a call. We’ll have coffee and explore this more together.

So what is soul care and how can we practice it? Soul care is a lifestyle; it’s a way of practicing the presence of God on a daily basis. They help us to be rooted in Christ and develop deep roots.

Soul care practices and spiritual disciplines can help us be filled with “the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might.”

Soul care practices can help us abide in Christ so the Holy Spirit can change our hearts. However, it remains all too easy for us to turn spiritual disciplines and soul care into the external righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Like Paul, we must realize that our righteousness comes from the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our inner self must abide in the True Vine if we are to truly live in Christ. It’s replenishing the well from which we drink, so we experience the living water of Jesus. As Henri Nouwen reminds us in his book, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*, “A spiritual life in the midst of our energy-draining society requires us to take conscious steps to safeguard that inner space where we can keep our eyes fixed on the beauty of the Lord.”

What does soul care have to do with the book of Colossians?

The city of Colossae had several different religions operating. There was a Jewish population. In addition to Judaism, some worshipped the Olympian gods, like the Ephesians worshipped Artemis. Others worshipped the emperor. And then there were the mystery religions. Mystery religions are called that because select few are given or earn knowledge that is hidden to everyone else. There is almost always some kind of initiation practice where the seeker gains knowledge as he moves higher in the faith. Often mystery religions denounce the flesh as evil and practice subduing the flesh. Some did this through ascetic practices, by denying the body, starving it. Others subdued the flesh by indulging in every kind of sensual pleasure, the idea being that once the body had been satiated, the mind was free to engage. The body as matter was unimportant. The mind was all. Matter was evil. Spirit was good. We can imagine that people from each of these traditions made up the church in Colossae, and now some of these false beliefs are leading them away from Christ.

Paul, the apostle formerly known as Saul who persecuted Christians, is writing words of love and encouragement to the Colossians. He writes while in prison in Rome. He refutes the idea that matter is evil by reminding them that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God...and in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:13, 19). In the person of Jesus, God became human putting his blessing upon the material and physical world in which we live. God as Spirit created a physical body to inhabit, harmonizing spirit and matter. The gnostic tendencies present in the church in Colossae, which held that matter was evil, are refuted by God becoming human, existing in the flesh. Jesus Christ is the “head of the body, the church...the fullness of God...who reconciled all things.”

All things are reconciled in Christ. While we may have created a division between church and world, and spirit and flesh, this is not supported in scripture. God does not confine his affirmation of human activity to those actions we consider “religious.” As we look at the life of Jesus, we see him affirming everyday human activities such as working, eating and laughing through his own actions. His work as carpenter and rabbi affirm our vocations. Jesus lived his life as a “seamless whole.” He was fully human and fully divine. There was no separation between secular and sacred in him. This is what we strive for in our own lives.

As physical beings, we find it easier to focus on physical things, things we can engage with our five senses (taste, touch, smell, see, hear). When we start to explore the spiritual world, our five senses can be a deterrent. We cannot taste, smell, touch, see or hear the spiritual world. Perhaps this is why we too often relegate it to a special category, confining it to a special day of the week, Sunday, where we gather for an hour or two before going about our everyday activities.

Kenneth Boa, in his book *Conformed in His Image*, speaks of this incarnational tradition as “holistic spirituality.” It refers to the centrality of Christ. It reminds us of Paul’s message to the Colossians: Christ is enough. He is relevant to every aspect of our lives. This is a biblical alternative to the world’s compartmentalization of our lives. When we compartmentalize our lives, when we say in effect, that what I do at church is more important than what I do at school, at home or at work, we diminish the role of Christ in our lives. Our lives at work, at home, at play are “ours,” while our lives at church are “Christ’s.” We often think we are the most “spiritual” when we are busy at church or attending a Bible study. We play by two sets of rules, one secular and one religious. Not surprisingly this segmentation of our lives leads to a discrepancy between belief and behavior, encouraging that all too common criticism of Christians: that we are hypocrites. A holistic spirituality engages ALL of our lives and reminds us, “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

When our life is a “seamless garment,” when we are as tuned to God at 8:00 am, 9:30 am or 11:00 am on Monday morning as we are at 8:00 am, 9:30 am or 11:00 am on Sunday morning, then we are free to reveal God to the world. Our life in Christ is not merely an adjunct to our life in the world; it *is* our life. We become the hands and feet of Jesus caring for the sick, loving the stranger unconditionally. We join with the Creator as his agents in redemption, in creating a new life out of pain, sorrow and suffering. We live in the truth of those words from 1 Peter each of us, regardless of job title or stage of life, is part of the royal priesthood (2:5).

How do we live a life of holistic spirituality? We focus on our interior life. It may seem odd to say that in order to live in the world as agents of God, we must first focus on our interior life. While the exterior life is more centered on what people do or say, the interior life looks to the source of what we do and say. The law focused on behaviors. Jesus spoke about the heart. While the law told them, do not murder, Jesus reminded us, "I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder" (Matt. 5:21). The interior life is the source of our actions. Philippians 3 affirms that true spirituality is not concerned with rules, regulations and rituals but with the person of Jesus Christ. The focus of scripture is not on religion but on relationship.

Why should we bother with soul care? Because we want to live in the reality of being rooted in Christ, so "we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:13). Soul care practices develop and deepen our relationship with Jesus. They remind us that Christ is enough.

It's like the old hymn says, "Fix your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim..."