

SOUL CARE 2: A STUDY IN THE BOOK OF COLOSSIANS
COLOSSIANS 2
MARCH 11, 2018

I want to start with a simple question today. Do you prefer the known or the unknown? Before you answer, be aware that this simple question might not be that simple. Do you prefer the unknown or known? Facts or mystery? Your immediate gut reaction might be to say the known, to say facts. Why? Because there is a churning in our soul, a scratching at the insides of our skull when something is unknown and mysterious. We are wired for answers. However, something we might not all be willing to admit today is equally true. Facts and answers can be equally soul crushing. We prefer the known until we know it. We resist the unknown until we have lost it.

To get some clarity on this, I want to take you to a quote from that good book. That good book is of course, *Calvin and Hobbes* authored by Bill Waterson.

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If I resolve the conflict, it would turn the intriguing possibilities into boring old facts. I prefer to savor the mystery.

If you are unfamiliar with Calvin and Hobbes, I feel sorry for you. It may appear to be a comic strip, but it is so much more. It is philosophy, it is art and it is about the meaning of life. It is the ongoing story of a young boy named Calvin and his stuffed tiger named Hobbes. Hobbes is real to Calvin, and they discuss every element of life and growing up.

Bill Waterson wrote Calvin and Hobbes for over a decade. He has since shared the inspiration for the names of his comic's two protagonists. Calvin was named after theologian John Calvin, who was a staunch believer in human predestination under God.

Hobbes was named after Thomas Hobbes, a moral philosopher who argued about the open-ended and free willed nature of humanity. It looks like a comic book strip, but it is so much more.

The beauty of this strip, and many others like it, is it tackles big questions through the lens of a precocious child. In this strip, Calvin has stumbled upon the big question I led with. Do you prefer known or unknown? Fact or mystery? This profound question affects every area of our world, education, religion and relationships. Our original inclination on all of these topics is to lean towards the known. The facts. For education, our society has decided to standardize testing and push kids through the conveyor belt of the educational system instead of giving them a love for learning. In relationships, we prefer routine and rules to keep our partners happy instead of a journey of exploration. In religion, many people prefer boundaries and swimming lanes of the pool of faith than swimming deep in the infinite waters of grace.

The Apostle Paul runs up against that problem with the church in Colossae. Sally did a wonderful job introducing our *Soul Care* series last week in the book of Colossians. For the four weeks leading up to Easter, we will be studying this short letter and exploring what it means to deepen our souls. To grow and nourish our souls. The problem, of course, is that the soul is seemingly ethereal. Intangible. If we want to take care of our bodies, there is some simple math about the type and quantity of calories we take in paired with exercise. If we want to take care of our cars, we wash them, change the oil and handle them with care. What do you do with a soul? Something you sense is there but can't really touch or see or measure.

The Apostle Paul writes that the greatest way you can care for your soul is to embrace the mystery, to not settle for quick answers or simple rules to follow. He is writing to a church that is being confronted by the society around it. This society is trying to corrupt the Christian faith. The biggest corruptions they offer is one of the most insidious things you can insert into a divine relationship, boring old facts. Rules that have been sapped of their

intrigue. This is the most insidious and corrosive thing you can do to Christianity that is steeped in the divine. You can make it human. Predictable. Linear. Factual.

Colossians 2:1-5

Paul leads with a powerful concept. He wants them to have all the riches of God's mystery, which is Christ. Paul uses this word for mystery some 20 times in his different epistles. This is not a one-off concept for the Colossians but something near and dear, something essential in the theology of Paul. He will elaborate on this in the coming verses, but he wants them not to be deluded by plausible arguments or substandard substitutions for the mystery. The Colossian church is being told that in order to go deeper in their faith, they must be circumcised, they must avoid certain food and drinks and they must observe certain holidays. This sounds very much like a Jewish sect is challenging the Christian church to obey the full cannon of scripture. That may be the case, but let's not get distracted. The bottom line is that very plausible arguments are being offered to the Christians of Colossae. Substandard substitutions for the mystery of faith are being offered in the form of specific physical rules and mandates. Paul elaborates on these rules in verse 8 and then in verses 16-18. These are add-ons. They are man-made addendums.

Colossians 2: 8,16-18

As I have told you before, I grew up in a conservative denomination of Christianity. I loved my church growing up, and I wouldn't be who I am today without it. But it, like all denominations, had its particularities. One thing I remember being taught in my youth group on a regular basis was avoiding cussing. The Bible says to not let unwholesome talk proceed from your mouth, so we didn't. Never mind that is the same Paul who basically cusses in Philippians 3:8 when he says, "I consider all things *skubala* so that I may attain Christ." Your Bible says rubbish but it is quite a vulgar Greek word for human waste. Okay, that's another sermon for another day. We weren't supposed to cuss, so we said, "shoot," "dang" and "dadgummit." What I didn't realize that I wasn't being taught was about the Holy Spirit. After my junior year in high school, I was asked about the Holy Spirit, and I had

exactly no answers. I thought to myself, “Dadgummit, my friggin youth pastor never taught me about the Holy Spirit.”

Instead of the mystery of the Holy Spirit, my youth pastor offered me the *skubala* of rules and mandates. A cheap substitution for the mysteries of faith. Instead of swimming in the depths of the infinite divine, I was confined to the shallow end of meaningless rules. To this, Paul offers a solution.

Colossians 2:6-7

As you have received Jesus, so walk in him. This word here is *peripateo*. Sometimes translated walk, sometimes live, sometimes act. It means walk in the same way we might say, “As you walk through the journey of life.” Peripateo is a loaded term that includes the concept of life and exploration. You know when you go to the shoe store, some people only open the box. They know their size, and they are just seeing how they look. Some people take it a step further because how it looks in the box can be deceiving, so they put them on and stand in front of the mirror to see how they look on. Then there is a third class of shoe buyer. They take them out of the box, stand in front of the mirror and start walking around the store. They try them out. They see how it works in real life. They take hard turns. They stand on their tiptoes. They walk up some stairs.

For some Christians, their faith is little more than shoes in a box. They open them up, they like the look and they put them away. Others put them on and stand in front of the mirror to see how it looks on them. Paul says, be that third kind of shoe shopper. Walk around the store. Walk in him. Explore.

He goes on to say be rooted and built up in him and established in the faith. Established in the mystery, not in the rules, not in the facts and figures. Rooted in this wild Messiah from Nazareth. This man who broke most of the rules. He spat on the Sabbath observance that lacked compassion and love. He sneered at pious church services that looked more like a casino. He openly condemned exclusion of outsiders like Samaritans and adulterous

woman and dishonorable prodigal sons. He broke almost all of the rules in favor of the mystery. The mystery of a God who is more compassionate than we could ever think. The mystery of a God who gives grace where we think none is deserved. The mystery of a God who would rather serve than be served.

Jesus broke the rules often. He preferred praying in a garden than in a temple. He more often taught from parables and anecdotes than the Old Testament scriptures. He spent most of his time in the world and not at church. Jesus set a path for us to walk around in the mystery. To commune with God while you walk through this world. To see him in seeds on the ground. To find him in grapes and vines. To understand him through stories about sons and fathers.

Here is something interesting to know about Calvin and Hobbes. Bill Waterson did something really strange. He never licensed the characters for product placement. Not because he couldn't, but because he didn't want to. Aside from bootleggers and copycats, there are no Calvin and Hobbes stuffed animals. There are no Calvin and Hobbes notebooks or McDonalds toys. Bill Waterson probably made a lot of money from his comic books and strips, but he could have made a hundred million dollars more if he allowed his characters to be turned into products. He didn't want that, and in fact he fought against it. He thought it would devalue his characters and pollute the concept of the simplicity of a young boy and his tiger learning about the meaning of life.

The Christian world at the moment is full of Christian products, endless amounts of keychains, calendars, trinkets and art. These are not intrinsically bad, but I think they can cheapen the whole experience. They can become little totems of our faith that become substandard substitutions for the real thing. Instead of diving deep into the depths of God's grace, we can just buy Christian stuff. There are endless amounts of hucksters and TV evangelists that will sell you Christian goods, but these are cheap substitutes. Paul closes his argument for mystery.

Colossians 2:20-23

As Christians, we are to die to the elemental spirits of this world. This means the prevailing wisdom. The normal way of doing things. The regular approach to religion. Paul says these have the appearance of wisdom. They seem kind of divine because it sounds like what a god might say to us. Avoid this. Avoid that. The reality of Christianity is not things to cease but something to begin. A journey to embark upon and walk about in.

Let me be clear, I am not saying there aren't guidelines for holiness and sanctification throughout the gospels and epistles. Next week in chapter 3, Paul is going to exhort the Colossians to holy living. A couple of things to note here. 1) God's rules are not to make him happy. They are to make us happy. I am a holiness pragmatist on this topic. I think sin is often viewed as something that makes God sad or mad because it hurts his feelings that we didn't follow his rules. Quite the opposite. God's laws are not arbitrary rules to satisfy his divine whims. They are designs for human flourishing. 2) Paul here is not talking about gospel laws but man-made laws and addendums. These are church created and man created addendums usually for the sake of control and power of leaders. I heard of a pastor here in the Bay Area who chastised one of the leaders for their poor church attendance. Now every pastor would love for you to be in regular attendance sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for their own reasons. What I didn't mention is that this was a woman who was pregnant and suffering from morning sickness. He'd rather she was throwing up in church than at home seeking God and praying over her child. Do you see the difference?

Paul loves mystery. As often as we think of his rules and directions, we can miss this consistent theme in his writings. The mystery of God. While we might sometimes prefer to know everything about God, I can assure you that the moment you felt like you attained all the facts about God, you would immediately feel hollow inside. You might not know immediately why, but it's because once the story of God is solved and completely settled in your life, then it has ceased being divine. Once an infinite God is neatly packaged and completely known, he is no longer infinite and divine. Some of the unhappiest people I know are those with the most robust knowledge of God but little experience of him. They

know all there is to know about the shoes in the box. They might occasionally even try them on, but they don't walk around the store.

If faith really is a mystery to be solved and not a fill in the blank work sheet to be filled out, then what are we supposed to do? Jesus made it pretty simple. Follow me. Look to the scriptures, see what Jesus did and copy it. Spend time praying. I don't care where or how. Pray in your backyard or in your bed. Pray a liturgy or freestyle. Write it down, say it in private or sing it in your car. Spend time reading and thinking. Spend time observing and pondering. Spend time being quiet alone. Soul care is not uniform. It is unique to you. Where do you see God? When do you most experience him? If your spouse is brought to tears by singing hymns and for you it barely moves the needle, don't feel bad. If you read poetry and that sparks your divine imagination, do it more. If you see God in nature, then carve out time to go on hikes. It's your soul. You only have one. What are you going to do with it?

Bill Waterson retired from writing Calvin and Hobbes in 1995. The strip was still incredibly popular, but Waterson felt like he had said all he could say or wanted to say. Fans were upset and wanted more, but Waterson decided to leave the party early rather than lingering too long. I want to show you the final strip of Calvin and Hobbes, because although it was the last, it feels like an invitation to more. While it may seem like the end of the journey, it is actually a snapshot that this is only the beginning.

<http://i.imgur.com/jEPHRjz.jpg>

Let's open our eyes to the mystery of Jesus and the depths of our soul. Let's go exploring.