



THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

FULLNESS IN CHRIST

Colossians 2:8-15

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⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

⁹For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

¹⁵And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Introduction – The Futility of Leaning on Human Strategies for a Better Life

It has been my habit for several years now at the beginning of each New Year to identify a character quality that I want to work on, give special attention to in the year ahead. The character quality for 2008 was discipline. I thought I needed to work on discipline because I do not feel like I am a very disciplined person. I was getting inspired, it was early January 2008 and I had my journal and my bible, I was praying and thinking I would work on discipline this year. I thought to get some encouragement and I thumbed through my journal to January 2007 and see what character quality it was I was working on January 2007. You need to imagine the chagrin when I came across January 2007, the character quality I was going to work on was discipline! I thought, "Yes, I need to keep working on this discipline thing." I have never really liked disciplined, not being disciplined, or getting disciplined but being a disciplined person. It manifests itself in my life in a variety of different ways. Perhaps you can resonate with this: an inability to keep on task with a commitment or a project, staying organized with the various details in my life, the kind of clutter that probably is in all our lives, managing it, staying on task

and on track of things, simple things like remembering to send a birthday card when my siblings' birthday arrives. I just forget, lacking the discipline to do these simple sorts of things. You can imagine if you are like me, you can probably resonate.

I have developed a great affection for organizational management tools. So books like *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*—has anybody read this book?—is going to solve my discipline problem if I read a book like it. Or, one that really got me energized was David Allen's *Getting Things Done*. It is this whole work flow life-system that is supposed to solve your discipline problem if you just implement this technique into your life. It really got me going because he developed a software for it, the technique for how to use it on Microsoft Outlook. It was like a double whammy; not only do I have to read the book, but then I would have to use it on Microsoft Outlook. I would clearly get my life organized; I would never miss a birthday; I would always follow up on appointments and phone calls I had to make; my discipline problems can be solved. And then I got even more energized when some computer programming guys had actually written a software program called "Omni Focus" which is really designed around this getting this done technique. So now I have this Omni Focus program, not only on my computer, but on my iPhone so I can carry my organized life around with me in my pocket! And you know that solved my discipline problem, of course. Right? That has been the disappointment.

Do you resonate with this? Techniques tools, strategies you try to implement in your own life thinking this is going to solve this niggling challenge I've got in my life. But then if you have lived just enough and you have leaned into that technique, or tool or strategy hard enough or just long enough, you realize you have no ability to get down beneath the surface and penetrate to the heart, and thereby change the habits. Have you had that experience? You have this with dieting. Do you have a dieting technique you use? Is it able to penetrate down into the heart, transform the disposition of the heart in a way that actually manifests itself in changed habits and lifestyle? It seems like it is a universal, human temptation to want to grasp for technique and tools to help manage and improve and cope with life—to try to lay hold of that secret insight, that key tool or technique, if I could just implement that with enough rigor and consistency, it would revolutionize my life and help me to manage and cope with the details of my life. It is a particularly dangerous temptation for Christians because it can divert attention away from the sufficiency that we have in Christ and cause us to lean into an inappropriately lean on these other tools and techniques.

This is exactly what the Colossians were being tempted with: leaning into techniques and tools, or strategies for living to enhance their spiritual life. You can read about it in Colossians chapter 2. They were tempted with things that perhaps you and I would be as tempted with in our context but the principles were still the same. They were being tempted with things like religious festivals and holidays. If they would observe these they thought it would really enhance their spiritual walk with Jesus. This included ascetic practices, extra rigorous disciplines for the body, or the veneration of spiritual beings such as angels. They thought this would really enhance their spiritual life if they would implement these things into their daily existence. This was all a temptation to the Colossians to enhance their spiritual devotion to Jesus. Paul recognizes their temptation to deviate from Christ and he challenges them to continue on in the faith, to continue on in the Lord. Look in verses 6 and 7: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him..."

Paul’s Warning – Don’t be taken Captive by Powerless Philosophies

We are going to see what Paul continues to do here, which is to warn them, verse 8. He not only challenges them to continue but he gets right to the point and addresses his central concern, which is, do not be taken captive by what the NIV calls “hollow and deceptive philosophy.” This is Paul’s warning, the main point of this little passage.

When we see the word “philosophy” or hear the word “philosopher” we think of Philosophy 101 that we took in sophomore year in college. Is Paul here on a tirade against the esoteric metaphysical discipline we call philosophy, and guys with tweed jackets and goatees who smoke pipes and talk about really weird things in their free time? That is not necessarily what he is getting after, per se. What Paul is getting after is much broader. The word “philosophy” in the ancient world in Paul’s context had broader connotation than the word “philosophy” does for us. Philosophy in the ancient Hellenistic and Roman world was really a way of describing a way of life built upon a worldview. We might call it a life strategy in our context; a tool or a technique or a methodology, a way of living out life or doing life; to try and get a handle on life and live it well, and flourish in it. Paul says do not be taken captive by these sorts of things, by ways of life, strategies based upon human tradition, verse 8, rather than on Christ. They are “hollow and deceptive”. Those two adjectives are important in describing the philosophy he is trying to dissuade us from being taken captive by—hollow and deceptive.

First of all, hollow, “kenēō” in Greek: that is “vain” or “powerless.” These are impotent philosophies, ways of life, life strategies, and techniques for living which are without power; thus they are powerless and therefore deceptive. Do you see that connection?—powerless and therefore deceptive philosophies. I download Omni Focus onto my iPhone, and my wife will tell you, I thought this is going to solve my discipline problem once and for all! I paid \$33 or whatever it was and was overly enthusiastic about it; it looked so good on the advertisement on the website when I read it; it was going to solve all my problems. It was promising all this good stuff. So I downloaded it, implemented and started organizing on it, put all my tasks on it, and got all these things I needed to do load up on there. And, yeah, there was some modest short-termed success and then you are back in your old ruts, with your \$33 Omni Focus in your pocket.

Paul’s Reason – You have been given Fullness in Christ

Here is the thing with those sorts of deals. Think about what it is in your life as I am telling you about my Omni Focus. Do you have something just like that in your life? All these sorts of techniques, tools, and strategies always over promise and under deliver. They are powerless, and thus they are deceptive; and so Paul says do not be taken captive. It is a military image he uses there. Do not let that tool or technique come into your life, and you give it so much affection and rely upon it so heavily that it takes you captive, like a little prisoner, and walks off with you. Those hollow and deceptive, powerless techniques for living, philosophies and life strategies are ultimately disappointing. Beware, be careful Christian! Friend, be careful; this is Paul’s warning to us in verse 8. Why? He gives us the reason why we should not be taken captive by these philosophies in verses 9 and 10. It is because we already have everything we need in Christ; in a phrase—sufficiency in Christ. You see the argument there. You have everything in Christ; therefore, all these other means of trying to manage, cope and enhance your life are superfluous.

Sufficiency in Christ: he drives at it in two ways. He first says everything we need is in Christ; verse 9: “For in Christ, all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form.” Everything we need is in Christ. You say it does not say that; it says “all the fullness of the deity is in Christ.” And you get the point. What is wrong with me that I cannot follow through on responsibilities but think that I need some sort of tool or techniques to enhance and cope with it? What is going on inside? It is a deep character flaw. And what is the only thing that can solve deep character flaws?—an encounter with the presence of God himself, not an encounter with “Getting Things Done” by David Allen or Steven Covey’s “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.” That is not where the fullness of deity dwells bodily; the fullness of deity dwells bodily in Jesus Christ. And so everything you need for human flourishing is in the person of Jesus Christ because the fullness of deity is in the person of Jesus Christ. And there is nothing we need outside of the fullness of deity, the presence of God himself.

So sufficiency in Christ, everything we need is in Christ: that is the first thing. The second thing is, in Christ we have been given everything we need. That is verse 10: “and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.” Not only in Jesus is the very presence of God and everything we can possibly want or imagine, but the bible says we have been given everything; we have been given fullness in Christ. It is an amazing thing! So as a Christian, the Christian life is not just about seeking after Christ because we know that is where the fullness of deity dwells—that’s verse 9—the Christian life is also about *receiving and resting* in the fullness of Christ we have already been given and received! Do you see that? It is both of these things, both a seeking the fullness that is in Jesus and an embracing and resting in the fullness in Christ we have already been given. That is the amazing thing! Isn’t it true that all the other life strategies, all other human philosophies, all other human religions—whether it is Kabala Jewish meditation which evidently is the rage out in Hollywood, or yoga or transcendental meditation or Islam—they are ultimately driven by what it is that you do; whereas the divine thing about Christianity is that it is all about what has already been given to us, what God has already done for us? That is what Paul underscores in verse 10.

So why should you not be duped to give too much affection or attention, or lean too heavily into life strategies and tools and techniques to manage your life? Because you already have everything you need for human flourishing as a believer, everything. You have Christ, in him the fullness of deity, and Christ has already given you everything! You have fullness in Christ.

Paul’s Explanation – Fullness in Christ is Freedom and Forgiveness

You may be asking: what is this fullness in Christ that somehow should liberate us? You see in verse 10 this little phrase, “Fullness in Christ,” the sermon title, what is this that sounds mystical and metaphysical? Does it have any teeth to it? Paul explains it in verses 11 through 15. “Fullness in Christ” he defines in two ways. It is, first of all, freedom. That is the first aspect of fullness in Christ in verses 11 and 12:

“In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

Paul is saying that at conversion when you became a Christian, you experience a profound and radical transformation. Profound! Some of you who are new Christians, who have become Christians just in the last couple of months, you need to listen up. What happened to you when you were converted? Something very profound happened in your life. Paul uses two images, two metaphors to describe what happened in your life.

The first is circumcision. Did you know that in becoming a Christian you got circumcised? Paul here is drawing on an Old Testament image, that of circumcision, the entry rite or qualification to be part of the Old Testament people of God, the Jewish people: the removal of the flesh of the foreskin. He is drawing on that image and saying that when you become a Christian, you are not circumcised with human hands but with a circumcision that Christ performs. That is a spiritual circumcision, it is the phrase he uses, it is the putting off of the flesh—the putting off of the sinful nature (NIV)—the putting off of the desire, yearning, this primordial lust that agitates for stuff, the power of the flesh. When you were converted, Christ severed that; it was removed through spiritual circumcision done by Christ's own hands. That does not mean you don't sin or struggle anymore; it means the fundamental power has been severed. Yes, you still live with all your habits you developed when you were in the flesh; but the power of those habits has been severed right at the root in circumcision. That's the first image.

The second image is baptism. Circumcision is how people became Jewish and entered into the old Covenant. He goes now into a New Testament image—baptism—which is how people become a people of God. This is an even more profound image that Paul uses to talk about this profound and radical freedom and change that has happened in our lives. Water baptism tells a little story about the person who is being baptized—his death in going down. When he is under water is a picture of burial, his being in the grave; when he is raised up and lifted up out of the water, that is the picture of his being raised from the dead. And it is a way of creating or enacting a parable of what happened in the life of Christ. Christ's own death, burial and resurrection are exactly what we see Paul doing. Having been buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. So through circumcision and baptism, not only has the sin nature been severed at its root, thus giving you freedom, but you have been raised from the dead! You now walk in newness of life! That is the kind of freedom you have as a Christian if you are converted.

So fullness in Christ consists first of all in freedom; a radical and profound freedom from sin or the sinful nature. But what does freedom depend upon? What gives rise to freedom? How is it that God can do this remarkable work in our lives? How is it that God can move into our lives, convert us and put off the sinful nature? What enables him, or allows him to do that in our lives. It is the second aspect of fullness in Christ and it is this: forgiveness. Freedom is the first part of fullness in Christ; forgiveness is the second part of fullness in Christ.

We see that in verse 13, 14 and 15. Here is the deal with sin: unforgiven sin has a tremendous power in our lives, so much so that Paul says we are dead in our sins. Can we get a starker image than that? Verse 13: "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God (nevertheless) made you alive with Christ." He is summarizing what we have been talking about, "He forgave us all our sins." Free, full forgiveness for all of your sins!

Here is the thing about sins: they stand against us. If your sins are not forgiven, they lean up against you! This is the image Paul uses in verse 14: “He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. The NIV uses “the written code with its regulations.” Quite literally, it is a record of debt. That is what stood against you and me.

Have you had any bills come to your house lately in the mail? What is the feeling you get when you open up a big bill and you are not sure you have the money for it? There is a rational for automatic bill paying: you never have this existential experience of having a record of debt being against you. What is that feeling leaning up against you? Just imagine arriving at your house in a big manila folder a record of the debt of all your sins. All of it! Not AT&T who can monitor all your phone calls but someone with omniscience, and omnipresence who sees all of it—the behind closed doors stuff, the when it’s dark stuff and you think no one sees, the thoughts that you know no one can hear save one with omniscience and omnipresence. Imagine what size that file would be if it arrives in your mailbox with all your sins! You open it up and you start reading this record of debt that stands against you, and you feel the weight of it against you! Friends, what Jesus Christ has done in the gospel, he has raided your mailbox and gotten that envelop with the record of debt, and has taken that massive file to the cross with him. As this text says, he nailed it to the cross, forgiving us all of our sins and thereby triumphing and disarming the powers and authorities. That is what we need!

My discipline problem is that I need the powers and the authorities that are over my life disarmed! You’ve got an eating problem, an internet pornography problem, a slanderous tongue problem—all of us have problems. Have you been keeping up with the Ted Haggard stuff in the news? Now that is instructive for Christians. Not just what happened but his beautiful response that we are seeing now in the way he is processing it with exemplary vulnerability and candidness, gospel suffused brokenness. That is what we need—for Jesus to nail our sins to the cross and thereby disarm those powers that can control us when our sins are not forgiven. That is what you can have this morning if you will come to the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what we can be reminded of afresh as we come to the table this morning.

Conclusion – What are You Leaning On for a Better Life?

So this year in 2009, I have decided I am not going to work on a particular character quality because it just works me up to move away from what I have already received. It evokes a need to press on to something else that I do not have yet. This is a good work this week for me and I hope for some of you too. You have been given fullness in Christ: full freedom and full forgiveness. Can you rest on that as an individual and as a church? Not resorting to hollow and deceptive philosophy like ministry techniques and strategies for making an impact. That is the temptation, friends—you step into a new context with a new pastor—and some expectations! Sometimes it feels so thick you can cut it with a knife! There is this expectation of: what’s the vision? Would it be a disappointment to you and me if I were to set the vision for the next three to five years as: to depend more and more on Christ, to lean into him more and more as a church and as individuals? Would that be a disappointment to you and to me? I hope it would not be. Can we commit to that in the months ahead, depending more and more on Christ? We have an opportunity to do so right now as we go to the table.

So I want to invite the elders and those who are going to be serving to come forward. And then I would like to lead us in a time of prayer. What I am going to do is invite you to just take a moment to articulate in your own mind and offer up to the Lord what or where it is in your life that you have perhaps been leaning into some tool or technique to help you manage and cope. Then let us collectively and in the quietness of our own hearts, ask the Lord to do a work in reminding us of his all sufficiency.

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