

The Epistles of Paul

Week 7: Colossians

Purpose:

One of three “disputed” epistles of Paul, the Letter to the Colossians centers upon the nature of one’s journey of discipleship. Most importantly, it seeks to outline how Christians should live in the Roman world while maintaining their commitment to Jesus. In modern theology, Colossians is hotly debated regarding social and household codes, as well as lauded for a clear focus on following Jesus.

1. Have you read Colossians before? Have you studied it? What did you think?
2. Does it matter if this letter was written by Paul? Does that add to or take away from its message?
3. What stands out to you most about Colossians?

Key Verse(s) of the Week, Colossians 3:15-16

14...clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Opening Prayer:

As we encounter your word this day, open our hearts to new possibilities through the power of your Holy Spirit. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction and Background:

As noted above, Colossians falls into the category of “disputed” epistles (along with Ephesians and II Thessalonians). This does not discount importance or theological assertions, but rather is a scholarly statement regarding authorship and date. For Colossians, there is little consensus by scholars as to when, who, and where the letter was written. However, the style, language, and theology so mirror Paul that it is debated as to its origins. Some of these debates include:

- Date:
 - Paul: likely 55 or 56
 - Not Paul: likely 70-80
- Author:
 - Paul
 - A disciple of Paul writing in his style
- Location:
 - From Paul while in Ephesus
 - From the church in Ephesus to Colossae

Moving beyond these textual issues, the focus of the gospel is the continuation of discipleship while being part of the Roman world. As time moved further from Jesus, it became more and more clear that the believers would have to live in some way within the wider world. This was an issue considering the difficulties involved in Roman life and the cult of the emperor. Colossians seeks to help the communities blend in while still following the ways of Jesus.

Perhaps most interestingly, much time (in chapter 2) is spent against philosophy and false teachers, likely pointing to a split occurring in the gentile churches regarding Roman religion and the emerging Christian theology.

1. Why do you think it became so important for the early Christian communities to blend in?
2. How do you think the delay (or reimagining) of Jesus’ return affected the later communities?
3. What do you think? Was Colossians written by Paul? A disciple of Paul? Someone else?

Today's Focus Passage, Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. What are the practices outlined here? How do they help individuals and the community follow Jesus?
3. This passage focuses on the community. How does the community aid in our discipleship?

Discussion:

Colossians pushes the reader to consider who they are not only living out their life, but how they are making disciples in a hostile world. While there were no Empire wide persecutions until the 3rd century, once Christianity began to establish itself as a new religious movement, it became the target of local persecution and legal precariousness. Gone were the protections afforded by Judaism. Gone were the protections offered by Roman citizenship. Claiming Christ meant one rejected the religion of Rome and was instantly an outsider.

Enter the letter to the Colossians. Here we find a developing ethic of how we as Christians adapt in the world and still live according to Christ. In our key passage, we even find an ethic of worship and discipleship to help guide the early churches in their development. While there are social codes later in the epistle that is troubling to many modern readers, these should not overwhelm the more important message: live for Jesus and seek good in this world.

1. Why was claiming Christ a social risk? Why was it a political one?
2. If the community is central to discipleship, how do we claim community when not being with each other in person?
3. Why are you following Jesus? What difference has it made in your life?

Conclusion:

The epistle to the Colossians is one of the more interesting works in the New Testament and helps us understand the difficulties of the early church. Most importantly, it re-centers us on the worship of discipleship, particularly in light of the growing movement within the Roman community. This message is powerful for us today as community is constantly reimagined and reworked. In reading Colossians we see the power of community for the church, giving support, teaching Christ, and leading in new ways.

Close in prayer