

THE SECRET TO HAPPINESS

COLOSSIANS 1:1-2

FULFILLMENT ONLY COMES FROM FOLLOWING CHRIST

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The Secret to Happiness

Colossians 1:1-2

We have just finished studying through the book of Leviticus. We said the statement, "Be holy because God is holy," could summarize the theme of that book. In fact Warren Weirsbe titled his commentary on Leviticus, Be Holy. Weirsbe titled his commentary on Colossians, Be Complete. I like that title because in Paul's letter to the Colossians, he encourages them to be complete in their study and understanding of correct theology and complete in their pursuit of holy living. He wanted the church at Colosse to recognize false teaching and fake holiness. So Paul wants the believers in Colosse to be complete in their faith, complete in their belief, and complete in their behavior.

Since we find this letter in our Bibles, we can assume that God wants this for us as well. The problem with the modern day church is that so many in our culture have become narcissistic in both thought and behavior. We have been raised to think that all religions are equal, that everyone has a right to their own opinion, and we can live the way we choose. I guess that's true from a cultural and political perspective. But those attitudes are absolutely false in the context of authentic Christianity. I think the following story accurately describes the attitudes of people in modern day churches in the West:

"One Sunday in church, members were praising the Lord for what He had done in their lives that week. Mr. Segal said that the roof of his house had caught on fire, but fortunately, a neighbor had seen it, and the possible disaster was averted with only minor damage.

A minute later, a woman stood up. 'I have a praise, too,' she said. 'I'm Mr. Segal's insurance agent.'"

You see, I think that we have a hard time even in the context of church to be more God focused than self-focused.

As I have already said, I like Warren Weirsbe's title for his commentary Be Complete. I would piggyback on that by saying the main idea for this morning's text and perhaps one of the main ideas that drive this letter would be this. **FULFILLMENT ONLY COMES FROM FOLLOWING CHRIST**. I think that sounds simple enough but this statement presupposes several thoughts. First one must know Who Christ is. One of the struggles of the early church in Colosse was that a different type of Christ was being preached. I have found that many people who claim to be Christian don't even know Who Jesus is or what He actually teaches. That's important because if we have wrong ideas about Who Jesus really is and we don't understand what He teaches, then we will have wrong ideas about life that will lead us to wrong thoughts and behaviors. Secondly, following Christ means that we know where He is going, where He is leading, and what He expects of us. It is clear that we can only know this by knowing His will as revealed in the entire Bible. Paul emphasized this in his letter to Timothy when he said:

¹⁶All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right.

¹⁷It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do" (II Timothy 3:16-17 / NLT).

Did we get that? All Scripture, not just the ones we like or are familiar with, All Scripture. It seems as if the Christians at Colosse were being confused because they didn't have a firm grasp on the Scriptures and didn't have a firm grasp on the Gospel. If we don't know the Jesus of the Bible, and if we don't know all of Scripture, we will make many false assumptions that will lead to wrong thinking and ultimately wrong behavior.

I. LIVING IN THE WILL OF GOD (VS 1)

God Has Prepared Good Works For Us To Find And Complete.

In verse 1 we are introduced to the concept of what it means to live in the will of God. God does have a plan for our lives. In fact **GOD HAS PREPARED GOOD WORKS FOR US TO FIND AND COMPLETE.**

A. PAUL

First of all, we learn who wrote this letter. Paul the Apostle wrote this letter. In order to understand the context of this letter, we have to do a little history.

Paul was born with into a very religious family. They were Jewish and belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. They named the baby Saul. So before Paul's conversion, his name was Saul. He was Saul from the tribe of Benjamin. There was another Saul from the tribe of Benjamin in Israel's history. He was the first king of Israel. He started off great. He was humble and faithful to God. But later in his life, he became prideful, jealous, and rebellious. God judged him and took his kingdom away from it and gave it to the next king, King David, arguably the greatest king in all of Israel's history.

On the other hand, the author of this letter started out badly. He went around persecuting the Christian church. He had the job of hunting down Christians, jailing them, and killing them. He was God's enemy. In fact when Jesus approached him Jesus said, "Why are you persecuting Me?" Saul was converted to Christianity and became perhaps the most famous Apostle of all. From God's perspective, the first Saul of Benjamin started off great but ended up badly. The Saul of Benjamin who wrote this letter started out as an enemy of God but ended up a beloved friend of God.

Further, Jesus saved Saul and Saul became an apostle of Jesus Christ. That's the way he refers to himself in this letter. His name was changed from Saul to Paul. God commissioned Paul to become an Apostle to the Gentiles. For the Jew, there were only two types of people in the world: Jews and non-Jews. They referred to the non-Jews as *goyim* translated to be Gentiles. Jews hated Gentiles. That is significant because Paul came from the strictest sect of Judaism. Paul had been a Pharisee. The word Pharisee means "separated ones." They set themselves apart by studying the Bible, keeping very strict religious laws, and staying far away from non-Jews. But now Jesus set Paul apart for the specific work of reaching these people he was taught to hate all his life. This would be a real test of Paul's obedience. Everything inside of him hated and despised non-Jews. Now Jesus is calling him to minister to non-Jews.

From an earthly perspective, it would make much more sense for Jesus to send Paul to reach his fellow Jews with the Christian Gospel. After all, Paul was highly educated in Jewish law, he spoke the language, and held a very high position in the society. Besides, Paul loved his fellow Jews. But Jesus sent Paul to the Gentiles and Paul went.

As we read the New Testament, we see at least three uses of the word apostle. First, it refers to The Twelve that Jesus chose. Secondly, it refers to groups that Jesus sends. Jesus sent 72 people out on a mission. The word used to send on a mission was this word *apostelein*. And thirdly, it refers to Paul as a specially ordained and commissioned apostle. There is a spiritual gift designated as apostle. I think this refers to modern day missionaries. It describes the gift of being able to pick up and go. These are very special and gifted people.

B. THE WILL OF GOD

Perhaps all of us are not called to be apostles in any of these senses. However, Paul was called and commissioned by the will of God. We are all called and commissioned by God. And God reveals His will to us in Scripture. Paul did not take this phrase lightly. Claiming to be called and commissioned by God or to speak the words of God were some pretty powerful claims. I know that we moderns throw around God's Name pretty frivolously. But Paul was raised as a strict Pharisee. Listen to what Moses says about people who claim to speak in the Name of God falsely:

"²⁰But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death" (Deuteronomy 18:20 / NIV).

Paul would be afraid to say God commissioned him and sent him out if he was not absolutely sure. Paul would believe that he should die if he claimed to be sent by God or inspired by God and he really wasn't. He took these words "by the will of God" seriously. I know I'm always hesitant and fearful to attach God's Name to my thoughts. I think we need to be careful as to how we use God's Name. I have been on at least a two or three year journey these days to control what comes out of my mouth. Here is the way we can know and pursue God's will for our life. Again from the pen of Paul:

"¹Therefore, I urge you, brothers (and sisters), in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ²Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:1-2 / NIV).

C. TIMOTHY

Next, we are introduced to Timothy. Historically, Timothy was born to a Jewish mother and Gentile father. Timothy was converted on Paul and Barnabas' visit to Lystra. About a year later, they returned and Paul took on Timothy as an associate. Timothy travels with Paul and then becomes the head of the church in Ephesus in order to lead it through some difficult times.

Timothy had a deep relationship with both God and his spiritual father Paul. Paul was a mentor to Timothy and it seems as if Timothy was a godly and gifted leader. He was a real joy to Paul. Paul viewed him as a fellow brother and coworker in Christ.

So Paul and Timothy send this letter. It is clear from the rest of the letter that Paul is writing this letter from prison. Scholars have tried to determine which prison. Some say from his imprisonment from Ephesus, some say it is the Caesarean imprisonment. There are time problems with these. They seem to be too early to account for all the people Paul names in chapter 4. The most likely imprisonment is the first Roman imprisonment. Paul was imprisoned in Rome between 60-63 AD.

There was a great earthquake that leveled Colosse and other cities in the surrounding area around 61-62 AD. So I'm guessing the letter was written from Rome around the year 60 AD. And just to give you some perspective, it seems as if Paul was released from his first Roman imprisonment around 63 AD. Then he was imprisoned again in Rome about 65 AD, and finally martyred in 67 AD.

So we end this first section by reminding ourselves that **GOD HAS PREPARED GOOD WORKS FOR US TO FIND AND COMPLETE.** Paul faithfully did all that God asked of him, which finally led him to be executed in Rome. Paul clearly lays this out for the church in Rome:

"³For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. ⁴Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. ⁷If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; ⁸if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully" (Romans 12:3-8 / NIV).

II. LIVING IN CHRIST (VS 2a)

Only By Humbly Living In Christ Can We Be Holy And Faithful.

Paul knew what it meant to live squarely in the will of God. In the first half of verse 2 he defines authentic Christians as people who are living in Christ. His message is this. **ONLY BY HUMBLY LIVING IN CHRIST CAN WE BE HOLY AND FAITHFUL.** One of the challenges of the early church was to keep the church free from false religion. Keep in mind that there would be people from all sorts of backgrounds coming into the church. Religious Jews would try and bring in some legalistic practices and try to substitute them for true religion. In the contemporary church, there are many people who have learned to play Christianity by using religious vocabulary and by doing all sorts of religious things. They give the appearance of being holy people. Paul strongly argues against this type of Christianity.

Another group the early church had to deal with were the people who came over from the mystery religions. They focused on a very mystical view of the universe. The church in Colosse seems to be dealing with some ideas and beliefs that come from the early beginnings of Gnosticism. We'll talk more about that later in our study through Colossians.

At any rate, the church at Colosse had to navigate safely through the rocks of religiosity and mysticism. Paul gives them some very good advice. That advice applies to us as well.

A. HOLY IN CHRIST

First of all, holiness can only come from living in Christ. In other words, holiness does not come from being religious, doing religious stuff, or talking religious. Being holy can only come from living in Christ. In other words, none of us should ever think of ourselves as good or holy. The thought that should occur to us daily and moment-by-moment is that we are totally and hopelessly lost without the finished work of Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Holiness is an act of God on our behalf. We just finished our study through the book of Leviticus. God made the nation of Israel holy by setting them apart from all other nations on earth. Further God demonstrated that holiness by liberating them from their slavery in Egypt. He set the nation of Israel apart for the specific purpose of making them a source of blessing to the whole earth.

God made the Tabernacle holy in the sense that He set this one particular tent aside from all the other tents in the camp. This tent was to be used only for worship. All the utensils that were used in worship were to be set apart from all other utensils. Once these utensils were used for worship, they could never again be used for any other purpose.

Further God set apart the Levites from all the other tribes to be the priests who would serve at the temple. Only men from the tribe of Levi could be priests. And further, only those who descended from Aaron could offer up sacrifices.

Jesus set the Twelve Apostles apart from all His other disciples. And lastly He set Paul apart to be an Apostle.

We are made holy when by grace through faith we commit ourselves to God. It is God Who makes us holy and sets us apart for a specific purpose. During our journey through "The Purpose Driven Church" we saw that God set us apart as a church and as individuals to worship, to disciple and to be disciplined, to evangelize, to minister, and to fellowship. It is God Who sets us apart. By the way, that word holy in the plural can mean saints. In other words, Paul is addressing the church members in Colosse as holy ones or saints. The key phrase in regards to this is in Christ. It is the blood of Jesus that makes us holy.

B. FAITHFUL IN CHRIST

Our response to this truth is to be faithful in Christ. The word here has to do with belief and action that is consistent with that belief. And we must keep in mind that faithfulness in Christ has nothing to do with our definition of what we choose to obey. Faithfulness in Christ means that we accept life the way He designed it and live according to that. There are too many so-

called Christians that talk and act a good religious game, but in the end, their actions prove their faithfulness is to something other than Jesus Christ.

I think way back over 20 years ago, I taught a series on James to high school students. I think I came up with this definition of faith: "Faith is action that is based on a belief." I think that is original with me. But let me quickly say that there is nothing new under the sun and I may have read it or heard it somewhere. The point is this. I can believe that IBM stock is going to jump \$30 per share tomorrow. It does not become faith until I take \$50k out of the bank and buy shares of IBM stock. Here is the difference. Before I buy the stock, I simply believe the stock will jump. It only becomes a matter of faith when I actually go out and buy the stock. Being an authentic Christian is not simply believing and talking religiously.

Authentic Christianity believes that Jesus is God, believes that the Bible is the Word of God, and lives accordingly. Too many people in Colosse and too many people in modern day churches have become followers of religion rather than followers of Christ.

C. BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST

Authentic Christianity leads to authentic relationships that make us brothers and sisters in Christ. True fellowship can only be based on a common commitment to the truths given to us in the Bible and demonstrated to us through the life of Christ. I know that many people don't like to read the Old Testament because they say it's difficult. But what really surprises me is the defective view Christians have of Jesus. They paint Jesus as this "let's all get along" type of guy. I always wonder if I have different Gospels in the Bible I read from. Ask people, and I'm sad to say even Christians, Who Jesus is and what He taught. You'll be surprised to see what a passive, non-judgmental, and impotent picture they paint of Jesus. As church people, it would do us well to go back and reread the Gospels.

D. THE CHURCH IN CHRIST

The church in Colosse and hopefully all modern day churches that claim to be Christian are part of the true church that is in Christ. At this time, it would be good for us to get acquainted with the Colossian church. Before Roman times, the city of Colosse was a busy and prosperous city. It was located just east of Ephesus and Laodicea. It was located in modern day Turkey. It doesn't seem as if Paul ever personally made it there. At any rate, Colosse was a great stop for people traveling north to Sardis and Pergamum. Travelers going north, south, east, or west used to stop over in Colosse. It seems that Philemon and Onesimus belonged to that church. We meet them in the book of Philemon. The Gospel probably reached Colosse through Epaphras when Paul was preaching at Ephesus.

By the time the Gospel reached Colosse, the town had become a small out of the way town because due to Roman efficiency, they made straighter and better roads that now connected north, south, east, and west. These new routes no longer went through Colosse. The church was never a big, influential church. Somewhere around 61-62 AD there was a huge earthquake that rocked the entire region. Although they rebuilt the city, it never again achieved any sort of fame. In fact by the 8th century the city was completely abandoned and disappeared totally from history.

There seems to be at least two interesting points about the history of this city for us. In the book of Revelation, Jesus addresses churches that are all in close proximity to Colosse. The book of Revelation deals with all sorts of catastrophic events that take place through natural and supernatural mediums. The city of Colosse experienced both types of catastrophes. First the Romans built new roads. That kind of destroyed them economically. The earthquake destroyed them physically. On the other hand, one of the churches mentioned in Revelation was Laodicea. They were a neighboring city and were able to rebuild after the earthquake and become a major player in society and in the church. In Colossians chapter 4 verse 16 we observe that Paul wants this letter sent on to Laodicea and he wants them to receive and read the letter he wrote to Laodicea. We don't have this letter and it is often referred to as the lost letter.

The issues that face the Colossian church are not so easy to lay out because all we have is Paul's answers. David Garland explains it like this. He said that it's similar to when we are in a room with a person on the phone. We can hear her responses and her end of the conversation. We can only assume, imagine, and fill in what the person on the other end of the phone is saying. I think that is a great analogy. Much of the New Testament letters are like this. Everyone Paul is writing the letters to know the problems he is addressing. All we have are his answers.

So as we study through this letter, we will have to try and piece together what the problems are that Paul is answering. Scholars have lumped them together and called them the Colossian Heresy. I have already stated that I think it is a mixture between legalistic Judaism and eastern Gnosticism. I think that it would be somewhat fair to say it could be comparable to modern day Kabbalah. But let me quickly add that I will be very careful as I lay them out as we study through the book. But the bottom line for Paul is this. Authentic Christianity has to do with acknowledging the superiority and deity of Jesus Christ, the sufficiency of His death on the cross, and a commitment to living according to the truth of the Scriptures. **ONLY BY HUMBLY LIVING IN CHRIST CAN WE BE HOLY AND FAITHFUL.**

III. LIVING WITH GIFTS FROM GOD (VS 2b)

Grace And Peace Can Only Be Received As A Gift From God.

The second half of verse 2 reminds us that we must learn to live with gifts that only God can give us. So many people are unhappy and troubled because they try to find happiness on their own. But **GRACE AND PEACE CAN ONLY BE RECEIVED AS A GIFT FROM GOD.**

Grace and peace are truly gifts from God. Paul makes clear in every letter he writes that salvation comes only by grace through faith. Salvation puts us in a right relationship with God. We cannot save ourselves. We can never earn our salvation.

A. GRACE

Our very basic relationship with God is dependent on grace. People who try to act religious, talk religious, or be religious are working against grace. How many times have I said over the past 18 years that we may be able to fool others and in some cases we may even be able to fool ourselves, but we can never fool God. Our relationship with God is based solely on grace. I am not worthy of this gift nor do I deserve it. It is only when we can learn to receive that we can be truly saved and truly thankful. When we come to this point and really believe it, then we can be thankful and find peace with God.

B. PEACE

And that brings us to peace. Peace like grace is a gift from God. People think that peace is the absence of conflict. People have come to think of peace is as I get what I want and everyone ought to be happy for me. In other words, there is no conflict in my life. This faulty view of peace comes from the world, not from the Bible. If we think we are entitled to anything, then we can never be at peace because we can never receive things as gifts from God. Peace in the Bible means that we are in a right relationship with God no matter what the situation. Peace is a gift we must receive. Authentic Christians ought to be able to experience grace and peace even in the most difficult situations. David's famous Psalm 23 describes this kind of grace and peace even in the midst of bad situations:

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,*

³ *he restores my soul.*

*He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

*⁴ Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

*⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

*⁶ Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever" (Psalm 23:1-6 / NIV).*

Grace and Peace ought never to be dependent on circumstances. They are gifts from God to be received in all sorts of situations.

C. FROM GOD OUR FATHER

And that brings us to Paul's last phrase in these two verses. Unless our faith comes from God our Father, our holiness is hypocritical and pharisaical. Our faithfulness is to our own lusts and desires. We will not find grace and peace because they come only from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps we are not experiencing the grace and peace we so desperately want because we have not put ourselves in a position to receive them as gifts from God. **GRACE AND PEACE CAN ONLY BE RECEIVED AS A GIFT FROM GOD.**

The Colossians were being confused by people who looked to be very religious. Either they were following all sorts of showy religious laws or they were speaking in mystical holy language. Paul gives them some very good principles and truths to help them get rid of their confusion. The truth of Colossians and of the entire Bible is this. **FULFILLMENT ONLY COMES FROM FOLLOWING CHRIST.**

IV. EPILOGUE

I really enjoy reading Warren Weirsbe's books because he has a way of putting things that are so plain. Listen to how he introduces the book of Colossians:

"Do the heavenly bodies have any influence over our lives? The millions of people who consult their horoscopes each day would say, "Yes!" In the United States, there are about 1,750 daily newspapers, and 1,220 of them carry astrological data!

Is there any relationship between diet and spiritual living?

Does God speak to us immediately, in our minds, or only through His Word, the Bible?

Do the Eastern religions have something to offer the evangelical Christian?

These questions sound very contemporary. Yet they are the very issues Paul dealt with in his magnificent Epistle to the Colossians. We need this important letter today just as they needed it back in A.D. 60 when Paul wrote it."