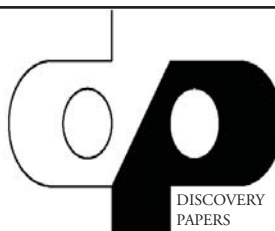


FILLING UP IN CHRIST

SERIES: WALKING IN THE MYSTERY



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Colossians 2:8-15

2nd Message

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I saw an interesting news article this week. A teacher in Florida was arrested for running naked through his elementary school after hours. When asked why he did this, he replied that he had achieved a “new level of enlightenment” and that he wanted “everyone to be free.” Of course, he immediately lost his job as an elementary school teacher because that’s not the type of freedom we want to be teaching our children. But he said he wanted to continue teaching “on a new level, with hands in the earth, gathering the essence and learning how to love one another and fully appreciate the spiritual realm.”

A curious story, but it’s one that interests us because of what this man has claimed to have found. He claims to have arrived at some level—new state of completion. Enlightenment. Fulfillment. Maybe even transcendence. And even though most of us would never run naked through an elementary school, there is something there in the idea of reaching a new level that is attractive to us. We know that life could be fuller or richer or better than it is. We could be more connected with something beyond us. Maybe we call it fulfillment, but whatever we call it, it’s something that we strive after.

The question that we’ll be asking today is how do we get there? Did this man in Florida get it right? Should we call him up? Enroll in his classes? Or is there something else? Today we’re going to ask the question, “how do we get filled?” We have this innate awareness on some level that we are empty. What does it take to get filled?

To address this question, we’ll be continuing in our series on the book of Colossians. We began this series last December as an Advent series, looking at the person of Christ and waiting for his arrival. We’re continuing it now following Paul’s encouragement from our passage last week to “walk in Christ.” We’re hoping to understand what it might mean to walk in the mystery of Christ as we read this book.

As we do that, we’re going to find that walking in Christ is more than what we thought it was. It’s not just what Paul wants us to do, it’s actually what we want to do. It’s actually the fulfillment and completion and new level that we yearn for. That doesn’t mean it won’t have some cost and might break some of our expectations. But deep

down, walking in the mystery that is Christ is the life that we were meant to live.

That’s what we’re going to see today as we look at Colossians 2:8-15. We’re going to see Paul warning his readers against looking somewhere else to find what they really want out of life. We’re going to see him use a curious phrase to say that we are filled in Christ. Not filled with Christ, but in Christ. Finally, we’ll see what he bases that statement on: how that filling comes about. We’re going to be talking about “Filling up in Christ.”

Don’t look elsewhere

Paul starts off this section with a warning. Remember that he wrote this letter because there was some kind of false teaching surrounding the believers at Colosse. Those false teachers wanted the Colossians to move on from what they originally heard about Christ. They wanted them to see their faith in Christ as a starting point and to think that they needed something more now. So Paul instructs them not to get carried away by this idea.

When we talked about this in December, we talked about how we sometimes feel the temptation to think that we have to move on to Christianity 2.0 or the next version of faith. We’re surrounded by all sorts of ideas: political, religious, social, and ethical. And in our culture, the temptation is always to trade up, upgrade, go with the latest, and move on to the next level. So after summarizing the basis of their faith in Colossians 2:6-7 with the powerful statement, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” now Paul reminds them that this is all they need.

Colossians 2:8:

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.

Paul uses some powerful language here to drive home his point. He instructs the Colossians not to be “taken captive.” The Greek word is *sulagogon*. It was used when

slave traders would enter a rural area, capture a bunch of people and carry them off to be sold into slavery in some city. For the people of Paul's day, this was a very real fear that they lived with. It wasn't an abstract concept, it was something they feared for themselves and their families.

But this word also sounds very similar to the Greek word *sunagoge* which means a synagogue. So Paul is probably making some sort of word play. The false teachers were likely part of a Jewish sect in the area. He wants to say that those people in the *sunagoge*—the synagogue—might *sulagogen* them—carry them away as captives.

Paul wanted the Colossians to think about people they know—people who lived next door to them—capturing them and hauling them off as slaves. He used language that tapped into their very real fears. He does this because ideas are important. What you believe matters. He wants them to associate believing something false with being abducted into slavery.

This is important for us to hear because we live in a world that is full of ideas. We are constantly bombarded by ideas. Because they are so common, we can be lulled into thinking that they aren't important. But they are as important as your freedom. Think about your neighbor breaking into your home at night, kidnapping you, and selling you as a slave. That's how serious ideas are.

Next, Paul tells us what's wrong with these ideas. First, he calls it "hollow and deceptive philosophy." It looks good on the outside, but there's nothing within it. This type of idea doesn't deliver what it promises. It tricks you into believing something, but once you do, it's empty inside. That's the first problem: these ideas don't deliver what they promise.

Then he comments on the source of these ideas. He says that they depend on "human tradition and the basic principles of this world." These ideas come from people. They come from creative, intelligent people. But it's not just from people. What the NIV translates as "basic principles of this world" probably refers to cosmic spiritual forces that are opposed to God. These ideas are passed down by people and encouraged by evil spiritual forces in the world. He summarizes this idea by saying that they don't come from Christ.

So these ideas lie about what they can do for you and they lie about where they came from.

I've been trying to eat healthier lately, but with a busy family, we often end up taking our kids to McDonald's

for a quick, inexpensive meal. It's not impossible to eat healthy at McDonald's—they have some decent salads and other options. But all too often, I get there and I see the combo meal: a big cheeseburger, fries, and a coke. It just looks so good. So I go for it and for the first part of the meal, it tastes great. But inevitably, afterwards, I end up feeling like I've been tricked. I usually don't feel so good. It's too much food, too sweet, and too heavy. I walk away feeling like I've been taken in, taken captive by what that nice lighted up board promised me. My meal didn't deliver what it promised. Was it really even beef? Sometimes I wonder if it came from where they said it did.

That's what Paul says about these false ideas. They don't deliver what they promise and they don't come from Christ.

So now we have to ask what kind of influences do we face that fall into this category? What kind of messages surround us in our culture that don't deliver what they promise and aren't founded on the person of Christ? For the Colossians, these ideas were coming from religious voices, but they were tempting them to move away from the person of Christ. I'd like us to consider what ideas we face that come from religious voices, even within the Christian culture, but that threaten to pull us away from Christ.

One of the strongest forces, in the culture that we live in, is the drive toward success. There are some very common ways that people in our culture define success: money, education, position, respect. We live in a culture that is absolutely toxic with its incessant demands for success. All too often we apply those voices to our spiritual lives. We come up with some picture of what it means to be a "successful Christian." And we drive ourselves crazy trying to get there.

It depends on the person as to what the image really looks like. Maybe it's "the successful evangelistic Christian." Someone who is bold and outgoing, but not so outgoing that they're annoying and maybe a little bit reflective too. Or maybe it's the "deep spiritual life Christian." Someone who fasts regularly, prays really powerfully, and loves to spend time alone, just reveling in the glory of God. Or maybe it's the "successful parent Christian." This person guides their kids masterfully toward a rich spiritual life, they aren't annoying about it though and they know when to give their kids space. This person's kids grow up to have strong faith. Maybe they have a little bit of a rebellious phase, but nothing too serious, just something so that they can talk about it later and say how they weren't sure how their kid was going to end up.

We all have some picture of what we think it is supposed to look like to become the successful Christian. But the truth is that these images are empty. When the goal is to arrive at some image, what happens when we get there? What happens when we've found the perfect mix of reflective spirituality and outgoing evangelism? What then? Will we finally feel OK about ourselves? These images don't deliver what we think they promise. We think if we get there, we'll be OK, we'll be content, we'll be fulfilled, but that's a lie.

The reason it is a lie is because these images don't come from Christ. They don't come from the person of Christ—the suffering servant who took on the pain and injustice of the world in his flesh for the sake of others. They don't come from the one who is supreme over creation and supreme over redemption. They come from other people. They come from some tradition that's been passed on whenever someone praises their mentor or a significant person in their life. It comes from some Christian, maybe a public leader or author whose life probably doesn't even really look like whatever the image we have of it is. However, their experience becomes a model that we think we have to follow.

Or perhaps it comes from spiritual forces who are opposed to God. Voices that whisper in our ears and create a picture of what it means to be a Christian that is completely unattainable. A picture that leaves us exhausted every night. Exhausted and never feeling like we can measure up. Discouraged and despairing about our hopes to ever be the kind of Christian or person or parent or student that we think we ought to be.

Think of us as a drinking glass, trying to be filled. We're trying to reach this goal of the successful Christian. So we keep pouring things into our lives. The right mix of Bible study and coaching soccer. Being in the world but not of the world. Reaching for this image of perfection, but as hard as we try, it just leaks out the bottom. We can't seem to fill up. We can't seem to get to the point where we are OK. Different activities don't help. Changing churches doesn't help. Reading another book doesn't help. We just can't seem to be filled.

I know there are people here in this church that are trying their best to be filled by some image of what they think a successful Christian looks like. And I know that you are exhausted, discouraged, and in despair. I know there are others who have given up because it's just too hard. You've stopped trying to go deeper because you've concluded that you're not like those really amazing Christians. You'll come to church and put in your time,

but you'll never be as good as the guy sitting in the pew next to you.

Whatever it is, the real problem is with these false images. They don't deliver what they promise. They don't fill us. And they don't come from Christ.

So what image are you enticed by? What hollow image calls out to you? What's your picture of success? How has it affected your relationship with Christ?

The Promise of being filled in Christ

Ideas are important. They can lead us closer to God or farther away. Ideas that are hollow and deceptive, that are based on people and kept alive by evil spiritual forces pull us away from the truth of who Christ is. That's why Paul challenges the ideas that are facing the Colossians. Next, he helps them to see why they don't need to listen to those ideas. He frees us up from their power.

Colossians 2:9-10:

“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,¹⁰ and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

He starts out by reminding the readers of a very important truth about who Christ is. Paul talked about this earlier during the hymn about Christ. Verse 19 of chapter 1 says, “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.” Christ is fully God. He is everything that God the Father is. “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.”

Early in the history of the church there was a huge controversy over this very issue. It was one of the earliest, most significant theological disagreements that faced the church. It came to a high point in the fourth century AD. And it all boiled down to one letter in Greek. Emperor Constantine had ordered the church to compose a creed that captured the essential ideas of the Christian faith. So a bunch of bishops got together and started writing. But pretty soon two camps developed about how they should describe Christ as God.

One camp wanted to say that Christ was *homoousious* with God the Father. That word in Greek means “the same substance.” *homo* means “same.” *ousious* means “substance.” But there was another group of bishops that wanted to add one letter. They wanted to say that Christ

was *homoiousious* with God. It was just one letter different. One extra “i.” That’s all. No big deal. But *homoioi* means “similar” in Greek. They wanted to say that Christ wasn’t exactly God, like the Father was, but he was very similar. This debate raged for a long time, but finally the council adopted the idea that Christ was the same substance as God the Father.

This is an incredibly important theological idea to grasp. Christ is of the same substance with the Father. That’s what Paul is reminding the Colossians. In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. Christ is God, like the Father is God. That’s huge. To get that wrong has implications on theology that affect everything because everything that we believe is centered around who Christ is and what he has done.

But after reminding the Colossians of this huge truth, Paul says something really remarkable. He says that his readers have been given fullness in Christ. All the fullness of Deity lives in Christ and those who believe in him have been given fullness in Him. This is huge.

Firstly, though, we have to realize that Paul isn’t making an equivalent comparison. He isn’t saying that Christ is in us in exactly the same way that the fullness of God is in Christ. The phrases are different. Notice that we aren’t filled up by Christ being in us. The fullness of God is in Christ, but Paul doesn’t say here that the fullness of Christ is in us. In fact, it’s kind of odd what he says. He says that we are filled when we are in Christ. That’s a different kind of thought. We normally think of being filled when something is in us. But Paul says that we are filled when we are in Christ. **You are filled in Christ.**

It’s as if Christ is a huge punchbowl full of water. The fullness of God lives in him. He is filled up with the fullness of God and we’re a glass that leaks out the bottom. How do you fill a glass with holes in the bottom? It can’t be done unless you’re in Christ. When we immerse this cup full of holes (ourselves) in him (punchbowl), we are filled up and full. Even though we’re broken and we can never hold anything on our own, when we are in Christ, we are filled up.

And I’m convinced, deep in my soul, even if I have trouble living it out every day that this is what each and every one of us wants. What we want is the kind of filling that we get when we are in Christ. That’s why we work so hard to get to this image of “the successful Christian.” That’s why we stress, strive, and tire ourselves out. We think that when we get there, we’ll be filled, but Paul says, “you have been given fullness.” This is something that

has already happened to us. Could it be that we have the fullness that we think we so desperately need? Could it be that simply by being in Christ and recognizing that, we have the fullness of the life that people all over the world are running after?

The only instruction he gives the Colossians in this passage is not to let themselves be carried away by false ideas. He doesn’t tell them to be filled. He tells them they have been filled and so I proclaim to you, who believe in Christ Jesus, that you have been filled. I’m not telling you to be filled. I’m telling you that when you believed in Christ, you became filled. You are this leaky glass in the punchbowl, filled in Christ. You’ve tried a lot of things to get full, but none of them have worked. In fact, nothing you can do will fill you. But if you are in Christ, you are filled in him.

The basis of fullness

We started off with a warning not to get carried off by false teaching as a way to reach some new level. Then we saw that the reason we don’t have to do that is because we are already filled in Christ. In the last five verses, we’re going to get some more detail on where this fullness comes from. Paul takes this powerful picture of being filled in Christ and he fleshes it out.

Colossians 2:11-15:

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.

Paul is speaking to an audience that is familiar with Jewish roots, so he uses circumcision as one of his primary metaphors for what happens when someone believes in Christ. This fullness is based on a strong connection with

the person of Christ. He repeats the idea being “in Christ” and says that we are “with Christ” as well.

From this passage, we can see that there are three primary ways that we have received fullness. Each of three ways challenges something that we assume about ourselves. The emptiness that we feel. The reason we want so badly to be filled. Most of us struggle with feeling that we are unwanted, unworthy, and unable. This is how we are broken. This is why we are leaky.

We are unwanted when we are excluded from the group, rejected from community, and passed over in relationship. We are unworthy when our failings seem to disqualify us from the opportunities we want, when others excel at what we want to be able to do, and when we can't seem to measure up to the picture we have of ourselves. And we are unable when we try to get it right and keep on failing, when we set goals and continually fall short, and just can't perform at the level we want to.

We feel unwanted. We feel unworthy. And we feel unable. But then Paul reminds of who God is and what Christ has done and that changes everything.

Circumcised in Christ

First, Paul uses the imagery of circumcision in a number of different ways. He says that we have been circumcised in Christ, that it's done by Christ, that it's not by men, and that it is something that has changed us completely. Remember that God gave the Jews the sign of circumcision as a way of indicating that they were his chosen people. Circumcision identified them as belonging to him. It meant that they were chosen, wanted, desired.

So Paul uses this image to say that this is what has happened to us. Because of Christ's work, we have been chosen. WE have been given faith. We have been invited into this new kingdom. This is not something that we deserve, it's not something that we worked for, chose, or earned. God has chosen us in Christ. That's what the picture of circumcision means.

I've mentioned before that we have a lot of animals as a family and our latest experiment has been with chickens, starting with them as baby chicks. Just before Easter, we brought home two more baby chicks, but then last week one of them died. So we have to get another.

Now, you have to know a little bit about what kind of life a baby chick receives at the Taylor house. They have

a warm place and all the food they need, but most of all, they have lots of love. The other day, I came home to find Rachel on the patio lying in the sun, snuggled up with a baby chick to keep it company. She said it was lonely. I tell her that she is crazy: my coffee from Starbucks costs more than these chicks, but she is totally in love with them.

So we're in this feed store and we walk over to the kind of chicks that we want and there's probably fifty running around, pecking and cheeping. We look at them, tell the person who works there, “we want that one,” and she reaches down and grabs a chick. We do it again and she grabs another. Now those two chicks belong to us. We take them home and they are ours. They have been chosen, selected, identified. And now they're part of our family. I have to think that our family is a pretty good place for a baby chick.

That's the picture that circumcision communicated to the Jews. They were chosen by God, selected, identified, and marked out because they belonged to him. That's what is true of us. We are not *unwanted*. We are *chosen*.

Buried with Christ

Paul transitions quickly into the picture of baptism, saying that those who believe in Christ have been buried with him in baptism. This is a picture of death. A picture of finality. It's a picture of part of us dying forever. Paul says that the part that has died is the part that was already dead. The part that was opposed to God, that was not identified with him—he calls it the “uncircumcision of our sinful nature.” The good news is that this part of us has been buried. It has been done away with.

How? Because Christ has silenced the voices that spoke against us. He has taken the Law that condemned us and nailed it to the cross. The Law and its consequences were carried out completely against Christ when he bore our sins on the cross. And now that Law doesn't speak against us anymore. The written code has been canceled.

We all have that voice in our head that sometimes tells us we're not worthy. It's a powerful voice because deep down, we know that it's partly true. We know that there is a darkness within us. There is rebellion, selfishness, hatred, and pride. It's there. For the most part, we do a good job of keeping it hidden, but every so often it comes out. And that voice tells us, “you're not worthy.” You're condemned. You're no good.

But Paul tells us that that part of us—the

uncircumcision of our sinful nature—was buried with Christ. It's gone. We don't have to let that part of us define us. We've been redeemed. We have been purchased at a great price. God wanted us so much that he paid the highest price to attain us.

We're not *unwanted*—we're *chosen*. We're not *unworthy*—we're *redeemed*.

Made alive with him

The fact that the dark part within us has been buried is only half the good news. By itself, that wouldn't mean that we have been given fullness. But Paul doesn't just say that we have been buried with Christ, he also says that we have been raised up with him. He says that we've been made alive with Christ.

This is what we celebrated two weeks ago. On Easter Sunday, we celebrated not just the fact that Christ was raised from the dead, but the incredible truth that we are able to participate in that resurrection. It's what we saw as people from our body were baptized. Buried with Christ and then raised up with him to a new life.

We are made alive. This is fullness. This is life. This is what we want. And Paul says that it is what is true of us. Even people who don't follow Christ often look at his life with respect and admiration. That's the life that we have access to now. We have the new life of Christ. Not some image of what life as a Christian is supposed to look like. We have the creative, surprising, and boundary-breaking life of the Son of God, living in us.

We've been made alive with him. We are not unable. We have the life of Christ. We are empowered by the life of Christ living within us. We can do anything God wants us to do. We're alive with Christ. We can finally be who we were meant to be.

Karl Barth was a theologian early in the 20th century. He wrote about what it means to be fully human, and said the fallen humanity that Adam experienced was only partial humanity. It wasn't the fullness of what it means to be human. He said that Christ is the true humanity. He is human-ness in its most human form. So that when we are in him, we're experiencing what it means to be truly, fully, and completely human. We experience the true humanity when we are in Christ. We know that we are wanted, worthy, and able to be fully human. That's fullness.

We're not *unwanted*—we're *chosen*. We're not *unworthy*—we're *redeemed*. We're not *unable*—we're *empowered*.

Christ triumphed

Finally, Paul wraps up this section by saying that Christ has won. His victory is complete and, in fact, humiliating to his enemies. It sounds to me like Christ is not a very good sport. It's not like the end of a football game where the winning coach makes it his first task to go shake the hand of the losing coach. You can be a good sport when it's a game. When it doesn't matter. But this matters. So Christ displays his victory. He wants the world to know that these powers and authorities are done away with. They have lost all power, all credibility. All influence over us.

These are the voices that we are tempted to listen to. The powers and authorities that we think are still in charge. The ones we listen to that tell us we're unwanted, unworthy, and unable. But those voices are dead. Christ hasn't only defeated them, he has humiliated them. He has shown the world that they are powerless.

It's just up to us to recognize that. To open our eyes and see that this is the truth of the world. Christ has humiliated those false voices, the empty promises, and the unattainable picture of success that is so easy to fall into. The result of all of this is that we have fullness in Christ. We have what we've always wanted.

What does it mean to be filled in Christ. How have you received fullness? What resonates with you? How do you experience fullness in Christ?

Conclusion

We started off by thinking about a man who had found a new level of enlightenment that allowed him to run through an elementary school naked. I'm pretty sure that he was listening to false voices. We may have different voices, but we run the same risk of being carried off by wrong ideas.

Stop being dragged down by voices, powers, and ideas that are dead. That don't deliver what they promise and only drag you further down and farther away from Christ. Stop trying to pull yourself up by some method that has been humiliated, cast in the shadows, and shown to be powerless in Christ.

Instead, know that you have been given fullness in Christ. You are in him. You are not *unwanted*. He has *chosen* you. You are not *unworthy*. He has *forgiven* you. You are not *unable*. *He has given you his very life*. Don't be taken captive for you have fullness. Live in that fullness. **Live in Christ.**

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