



STUDY GUIDE



Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide

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Study Through the Bible

Colossians

Why read this book?

Some people have been surprised to discover something new about a friend they thought they knew well. That's one of the exciting things about a relationship with Christ: there's no limit to the things we can learn about him. Reading Colossians is one way we can discover a few more things about Jesus and learn how we can honor him.

Who wrote this book and to whom was it written?

While under house arrest in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote to believers in the small city of Colosse, located in the southwest interior of what is now Turkey.

When was it written?

About A.D. 60 to 62, during the time Paul awaited trial on an appeal to the Roman emperor Nero.

Why was it written?

A group called Gnostics (derived from the word for *knowledge*) claimed that they possessed privileged supernatural knowledge necessary for salvation. Paul wrote to warn about the subtle arguments and false teachings that threatened to undermine the Colossians' faith.

What is the background of this book?

Epaphras, a disciple of Paul, had founded the church at Colosse. Now it was under constant pressure from the numerous religious philosophies abounding in the first-century world. Colosse seems to have become a center for Gnosticism, a hybrid religion and philosophy that mixed Christian, Jewish, and possibly pagan beliefs.

What to look for in Colossians:

The supremacy of Christ and what that means for our everyday lives. Look for insights that show specific ways we can develop attitudes and actions to honor the Lord.

From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)



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Basic Group Guidelines

Though we call these Basic Group Guidelines, these are also essential in all relationships and environments. These should be observed whether in a 1-on1 conversation or in a group discussion.

- *Guidelines give boundaries for people to operate within.*
- *They help with the flow and pace of the discussions.*
- *The help us value one another.*
- *They help people to be more comfortable sharing deep and meaningful things.*

THIS IS A SAFE GROUP

Confidentiality is key, what is said in the group stays in the group. Be aware how you are affecting the environment: words, actions, and non-verbal communication. This needs to be a place where people feel comfortable opening up and sharing.

NO CROSSTALK

Be considerate of others as they are sharing. No side conversations, checking phone, responding to text or email, etc.

LISTEN

Let's value one another by listening to what is being shared. Allow a pause after someone shares to allow them to finish and others to consider what was said. Eye contact and body posture play key roles in creating a positive or negative group environment.

NO RESCUING OR FIXING

We are not here to fix each other, Jesus does that part. Avoid the tendency to rescue when someone is struggling to get the words out or shares a struggle or conviction.

USE "I" STATEMENTS

It's easy to talk about the issues of other or respond with "we", "us", "the church". But for us to grow as disciples and build relationship we want to use "I" statements.

DON'T OVER-TALK

We want to create time for all members of the group to participate in the discussion. Be careful not to always be the first responder or regularly give long responses.

FIGHT FOR RELATIONSHIP

It's not 'if' conflict or hurt feelings will happen, but 'when'. We commit to fight for relationship with each other. Go to that person and share your struggle or seek wise advice if you are not sure how to handle the conflict.

Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide - Study 1

How to Please God

*To please God we need to love him enough to make a difference
in the way we act, think, and live.*

Colossians teaches principles for living a Christian life in the midst of a non-Christian culture. Sometimes this calls for us to stand against the tide of public opinion or popular trends. In chapter one, Paul tells the Colossian Christians that he prays for them on a regular basis, asking God to “fill [them] with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” He goes on to say, “We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way...” This study will examine four components of living a life pleasing to God.

Scripture:

Colossians 1:1–14

Based on:

The “Against the Tide” sermon series by Steve May, PREACHING TODAY SERMONS



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Our goal should be to please God in all that we do. However, you cannot work your way into heaven or a right relationship with God. If you want to come alive spiritually, you must be born again. You must surrender your life to Christ and ask him to forgive your sins, fill you with the Holy Spirit, and make you into a brand new person. When you do that, he makes you spiritually alive, and then you're ready and able to do good works. Paul says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). Then, he goes on to say, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10).

Doing good works doesn't save you or make you more of a child of God than you were before. You must give your life to Jesus before you can begin to work for him.

It's like this: Your child's job may be to clean his room, do his homework, mow the yard, take out the trash, shovel the snow off the sidewalk, and on and on. He doesn't do all these jobs in order to be your child; he does them because he is your child. When your child does what he's supposed to do, you're ecstatic.

Discussion starters:

[Q] What comes to mind when you hear that you should please God? Where did you get that perception? Do you think that's what Paul means when he says we should please God? Why or why not?

[Q] What is the difference between pleasing God to gain acceptance from him and pleasing him because we love him? How might that view affect your attitude toward God over your lifetime?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: We please God by doing good works.

Read Colossians 1:1–10. The first step in living a life pleasing to God, Paul says, is that we are to bear fruit in every good work (v. 10). As Christians we live with the assurance that our good works are not wasted. When we do good, God blesses it and uses it for his eternal purposes, even if we don't see immediate returns on our efforts.

The "bearing fruit" part that Paul talks about is God's responsibility; he'll make it happen. The "good works" part, however, is our responsibility.

What kind of good works? The Bible gives us a great deal of direction in this matter—we're to help the poor, reach out to the lost, honor our parents, encourage our children, forgive our enemies, show mercy and compassion to others, and on and on. These are all general "good works" that we should all be doing. But you might ask, "What specific 'good work' does God



want me to do?" The answer to this question is determined by the answer to three other questions:

1. What has God given you the ability to do?
2. What has God given you the desire to do?
3. What has God given you the opportunity to do?

When you weigh the answers to these questions, you will find an area of ministry that is fulfilling and productive, where you can serve him with your greatest ability to his greatest glory.

[Q] What does the spiritual wisdom that Paul prays for in Colossians 1:9 have to do with the good works we are to do in verse 10?

[Q] What does it mean to have the "knowledge of his will"? How do we get that?

[Q] What do you think a "life worthy of the Lord" looks like? Can you name someone who you think is living that way? What about them convinces you that they are living a life worthy of the Lord?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us discover the good works God wants us to do.

Activity: Break into pairs and take turns answering the three questions posed above. Allow at least ten minutes for this. Then bring everyone together again and discuss any conclusions you came to.

Teaching point two: We please God by getting to know him.

Reread Colossians 1:10. We are instructed to grow in the knowledge of God.

Steve May shares:

A few weeks ago I was on my way to a meeting and my son asked if he could go. I said, "Sorry, but no. The meeting will be long and tedious. You'll be bored out of your skull."

He said, "You'll be there, won't you?"

I said, "Yes."

And he said, "Then it won't be too bad."

Now, how do you think that makes a father feel? Can you guess that he got to go to the meeting with me? Also, occasionally he'll ask me a question, like "Who was your favorite band when you were in high school?" or "Who's your favorite quarterback?" or "Who will you vote for to be president?" He asks questions like this because he wants to know me, and this desire pleases me very much.



In the same way, God is pleased with our desire to know him. Some people approach this in a backwards manner. They try to develop an image of God that pleases them. On the bulletin board in a church, there was a notice for an upcoming workshop called “Do-It-Yourself Theology.” The poster said that the workshop would help participants “develop a concept of God you can live with.”

This is not the way to approach God. We cannot say, “This is the kind of God that pleases me, so this is how I want you to be.” Instead, our attitude must be, “God, reveal yourself to me. Show me the way you are.”

God wants us to know him, and he will make himself known if we will make the effort to know him. The more time we spend in God’s presence and in his Word, the more we will know what he is really like.

- [Q] Why is the knowledge of God crucial to our entire lives?
- [Q] What kinds of things have best helped you to know God?
- [Q] How have you tried to fit God into an image that pleases you instead of getting to know the true God? Why would this be so offensive to God?
- [Q] How do the following statements show how we might try to make God into an image that pleases us rather than getting to know him as he truly is? How can we move past these feelings of wanting to make God comfortable to us?
 1. I never read the Old Testament because God seems so vengeful.
 2. All passages of Scripture that portray women in an unsavory light offend me.
 3. Any mention of hell in the Scriptures is archaic and outdated.
 4. I only read the passages in Scripture that make me feel good.
 5. I never read passages of Scripture that seem politically incorrect.

Teaching point three: We please God by enduring with patience.

As we read Scripture, we notice that God places a great deal of value on endurance. It’s not enough to start well; God wants us to finish well.

God places great value on the ability to endure, but let’s not lose sight of where that ability comes from. There’s only one way we can endure. Read Colossians 1:11.

If you try to live your life in your own power, you will fail. But, if you yield yourself to God, he will fill you with his strength and power and give you the ability to endure.

There’s a story about a little boy who was trying to fix his bicycle, and he wasn’t having much success at it. He tried and tried, but failed again and again. Finally, in frustration, he threw down his tools and said to his father, “I give up. I’ve done everything that I can, but I just can’t fix my bike.”

His father said, “Have you asked for my help?”



The boy said, “No.”

The dad said, “Then you haven’t done everything you can do.”

God wants us to endure till the end, but the only way that can be done is by trusting him to strengthen us according to his might—not our own. How do you receive his power? Just like the little boy who needed help with the bicycle: you ask. It pleases God when we trust him, depend on him, and turn to him as our only source of strength.

- [Q] Read 1 Corinthians 9:24–27. How does this athletic metaphor describe our lives as Christians? What do you think Paul means by verse 27?
- [Q] Read 2 Timothy 4:7–8. What is the good fight Paul refers to in this passage? Why is it so important that we finish the race? What reward is there for this (v. 8)?
- [Q] Read Galatians 6:9. Why would Paul need to warn us not to become weary in doing good? How can we avoid such weariness?
- [Q] Why is it impossible to endure faithfully in pleasing God by our own power? How can we trust God for power?

Teaching point four: We please God by having a thankful heart.

Read Colossians 1:12–14. When we begin to understand what Christ has done for us, we cannot help but feel grateful, and we cannot help but feel obligated—we owe him our very lives.

Think of all the other things God has done for you, all the blessings he has put in your life—the people who love you, your job, your home, your family, your country, your church. When you think of all that God has done for you, you cannot help but feel grateful. However, God does not want our gratitude to be expressed from a sense of dread; he wants it to be expressed from a sense of joy—“joyfully giving thanks to the Father.”

With gratitude comes a sense of obligation. He has given us everything we have; in return, we must give everything we have to him.

- [Q] What has God done for us that demands our gratitude? Look again at verses 12–14 and name all the things in those verses for which we should thank him.
- [Q] How can we learn to respond with thankfulness rather than criticism to the things God sends our way? Give some practical examples.
- [Q] Spend some time as a group recounting all the reasons you have to be thankful to God. Name as many things as you can. Or, rather than naming them, take time to thank God in prayer for those things.



PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

We love God with our strength when we do good works; we love God with our mind when we seek to know him; we love God with our soul when we yield ourselves to him and allow him to fill our souls with his power; we love God with our hearts when we joyfully express our gratitude to him for all he has done.

This is what pleasing God is about—that we love him to the extent that it makes a difference in the way we act, think, and live.

Action Point: Which teaching point do you most need to apply to your life? Close by praying for the point each person mentioned.

—Study by Steve May, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide - Study 2

An Easy Life or a Great Life?

Success is not about living an easy life; it's about living a great life.

We all know there is a difference between wealth and success. Many people who are wealthy have made a disaster of their personal lives. There is also a difference between power and success. Think of all the 20th-century dictators who are now remembered only for the destruction they brought to those around them. One of the hallmarks of becoming a Christian is redefining what it means to be successful. This study will help you to do that.

Scripture:

Colossians 1:15–2:1

Based on:

The "Against the Tide" sermon series by Steve May, PREACHING TODAY SERMONS



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

What is the mark of true success? More than just having or doing things, success can be defined as “living a great life.” It means living a life that makes a difference, that has a positive impact on those around you and continues to benefit others even generations after you’re gone. In that case, to be successful you don’t have to be a celebrity, and you don’t have to be rich, but there are three things you have to be willing to do. In the last few verses of Colossians 1, Paul discusses these three attitudes and how they drove him to be the person that he was. In these attitudes we see a blueprint for success. If you apply them to your job, ministry, marriage, children, dreams, goals, or anything else, you will be successful.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] What comes to mind when you think of the word *success*?

- [Q] Name some people who you consider to be successful. What makes them that way?

- [Q] In what ways does Christ view success differently than the world does?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: To be successful you must be willing to suffer.

When we look at successful people, we only see the fruits of their success. We don’t see the heartaches, pain, and loneliness that go along with it. Successful people, even those the world considers successful, have to be willing to suffer. They have to be willing to work long hours, endure criticism they don’t deserve, and give more than they’re sometimes able to give.

Paul was willing to pay that price for an entirely different reason than money and power. Read Colossians 1:15–2:1.

When Paul makes reference to “what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions” (v. 24), he is not saying that Christ’s death on the cross wasn’t sufficient for our salvation. He’s saying that everyone who wants to live a godly life must suffer (1 Peter 4:1); in suffering we unite ourselves with Christ. Paul is saying that what is lacking is his own experience of Christ’s sufferings in his day-to-day life.

Helen Roseveare is a British medical doctor who worked for many years as a missionary in Zaire. During the revolution of the 1960s, she often faced brutal beatings and other forms of physical torture. On one occasion, when she was about to be executed, she feared God had forsaken her.

In that moment, she sensed the Holy Spirit saying to her: Twenty years ago you asked me for the privilege of being identified with me. This is it. Don’t you want it? This is what it means.



The privilege of serving Christ through her sufferings overwhelmed Dr. Roseveare. After she was delivered, she wrote about her experience with God: “He didn’t stop the sufferings. He didn’t stop the wickedness, the cruelties, the humiliation or anything. It was all there. The pain was just as bad. The fear was just as bad. But it was altogether different. It was in Jesus, for him, with him.” (Philip Ryken, *The Message of Salvation*; InterVarsity Press, 2001)

The fact is, many people crack under the pressure the successful must endure. If you want to be successful, you must be tough. You must be willing to endure criticism. You must be willing to work hard. You must be willing to give above and beyond the call of duty. You must be willing to suffer.

- [Q] Look again at Colossians 1:15–23. What do these verses tell us about Christ? Name as many things as you see. How does knowing this about Christ give us a reason to be willing to suffer for him?
- [Q] What does verse 23 tell us about how to persevere, even when it’s tough? What should we focus on?
- [Q] What are some ways that we suffer to be faithful to Christ? Name any personal experiences that illustrate this.

Teaching point two: To be successful, you must be willing to serve.

Jesus made this plain to us when he said, “The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matthew 20:28). He also said “a student is not above his teacher” (Luke 6:40). If Jesus came to serve others, then we also have to serve.

Politicians are referred to as public servants, but sometimes it seems like the concept has disappeared. When Jesse Ventura was governor of Minnesota, he said in a *Playboy* interview, “Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people.” Ventura’s approval rating dropped 19 points overnight, and his remarks conflicted with the opinion of 75 percent of the people he was supposed to be committed to serving.

Obviously, this is not the attitude of a servant, and it is not an attitude that leads to success. We are called to lead, but becoming a leader requires that we do two things well: 1) we must identify with those we lead, and 2) we must be willing to serve those we lead. This was Paul’s attitude as we see in Colossians 1:25.

Paul was undoubtedly the most significant leader of the first-century church. But he led people by serving them, giving his life for them, enduring hardship for them, and sacrificing for them. He committed his life to teaching the Word of God, telling people about Jesus, and showing them how to grow as Christians. Reread verses 26–28. Paul understood a crucial principle: Success is not a life of privilege; it’s a life of service.

You can only live a life of service if you’re committed to loving others. A leader who loves people devotes his life to serving them; this attitude leads ultimately to success. A leader who doesn’t love people spends his life using them; this attitude leads ultimately to failure. If you want to be successful, you have to be willing to serve.

- [Q] According to verse 25, what made Paul a servant? Why did that make him a servant?



- [Q] Looking at verse 27, what kind of riches can we expect if we are servants of Christ? Is this better than earthly riches? Why or why not?
- [Q] In what ways are we all called to serve others the way Paul did in verse 28? What are some practical ways to do this?
- [Q] How could each of the following leaders serve those whom they are leading?
1. A teacher of a third grade class
 2. A factory supervisor
 3. A board president
 4. A college professor
 5. A father

Teaching point three: To be successful, you must be willing to struggle.

Success isn't about having an easy life; it's about living a great life. This takes work. If your goal is anything less than greatness, you will eventually quit. True success requires a lifelong willingness to remain in the struggle.

If you ever saw the late Walter Payton play, then you already know that he was the best running back ever to take the field. In a film showing his off-season training routine, Payton was running in the summer heat up a hill covered with loose dirt and rocks. He would stumble his way up the hill, sprint down, and sprint back up. At this point he was already the best, so why did he keep doing this? He had plenty of money. Why did he work so hard in the off season?

The answer is obvious. Payton realized that no matter how much you succeed, you never stop struggling—you never quit. The more you succeed, the harder you have to work. The struggle never ends.

Paul's struggle was to lead others into a life-changing relationship with Jesus, and he refused to let up. Read Colossians 1:29–2:1.

Success is not easy. It requires hard work—a lifelong commitment to struggle. The more you succeed the more you have to struggle. Anytime you see a successful business, team, church, or marriage, you can be sure that someone has paid the price and stayed in the struggle in order to succeed.

But it is absolutely worth it. Our goal isn't money, fame, prestige, or power. Our goal is to live a great life that will have an eternal impact.

- [Q] What is the biggest struggle you have in the Christian life? What tempts you to want to give up?



- [Q] How can we learn to struggle with all our strength (v. 29)?
- [Q] What is the difference between struggling with all we've got and living a hectic life?
- [Q] Paul struggled even for those he didn't know (2:1). What are some ways we might do that?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Steve Camp wrote a song called "Run to the Battle" that begins with the line, "Some people want to live within the sound of a chapel bell, but I want to run a mission a mile from the gates of hell."

That's what success really is. It's not about living an easy life; it's about living a great life.

You may be able to get through life without too much effort. You can coast through your job, your marriage, your commitment to your children, and never allow yourself to be inconvenienced. But if you want to succeed, it will require much more. You must be willing to suffer, you must be willing to serve, and you must be willing to struggle. That's the difference between an easy life and a great life.

Action Point: Write down five goals that you'd like to characterize your life. Ask if anyone wants to share them with the group. Spend some time praying for each person to achieve those goals.

Optional Activity

Purpose: *To help us consider what kind of impact we'd like to have.*

Activity: *Provide everyone paper and pen. Give the group five to ten minutes to write a sentence or two of what they would like their eulogy to say when they die. Give everyone who would like to a chance to read it for the group.*

—Study by Steve May, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide - Study 3

A Stable Walk with God

We are saved by faith, and we live by faith.

If your Christian life resembles a roller-coaster ride, Colossians 2:2–7 can show you how to establish stability in your daily walk with Jesus. Paul uses four pivotal phrases that are crucial to living in Christ; these will help you develop consistency in your relationship with him. This study will look at each one.

Scripture:

Colossians 2:2–7

Based on:

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

The TV commercials claimed the special adjustable bed would cost 50 percent less than the cost of the average bed, with prices beginning at about \$400. So the elderly woman invited a salesman to come to her home and make a presentation. After a painfully drawn out three-hour sales pitch, she was told the price of the bed was \$3000 rather than \$400. When she told the salesman there was no way she could afford that much for a bed, a minor miracle occurred: he lowered the price by \$200, then \$500, and finally \$1000. Still, it was too much for her to afford on her fixed income, and eventually the man left without making a sale.

Most of us have probably experienced this kind of situation. The price seems unbelievably low going in and becomes unbelievably high before the process is through.

Unfortunately, some people think this is how the Christian life is. Becoming a Christian seems like the easiest thing in the world—all you have to do is ask Jesus to come into your heart and forgive you of your sins and you get to go to heaven. That's all there is to it. Then, when you begin making an effort to live the Christian life, you discover there are some hidden costs involved: you have to give up your money and your Sunday mornings, you have to read your Bible and pray, and you have to stop sinning and start doing good works. And (depending on your denominational affiliation) you may also have to give up movies, TV, video games, carbonated beverages, seafood, pork, beef on Friday, rock music, lipstick, blue jeans, dancing, swimming in a public pool, and anything that contains caffeine. Wow! Is that really what living the Christian life is all about?

No wonder many Christians find themselves thinking, *This is impossible! I can't do it!* They try to be obedient, they try to follow the rules, but it seems the more rules they follow, the more rules there are. Still, they roll up their shirtsleeves and give it the old college try, and maybe they succeed for a week or two. Then they bottom out, give in to temptation, get too busy to read their Bible, and become too disillusioned to pray. It isn't long before sin creeps back into their lives, and they are overcome with discouragement and flail around miserably for days, weeks, or months until they're able to muster the energy to try again.

The Book of Colossians teaches a completely different approach to Christian living—one that will revolutionize your walk with Christ when you begin to apply it to your life.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] When you first became a Christian, what did you think it would cost you? How did that perception change as time went on?

- [Q] Have you found the Christian life to be easy or difficult? What has made it one or the other?

- [Q] Is your perception of the Christian life formed by the church, other Christians, your family, or the Scriptures?



PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Live in Christ, rooted in him.

Read Colossians 2:2–7. Paul says that you live the Christian life the same way that you enter the Christian life. You entered the Christian life by surrendering your life to Christ, opening your heart to him, and trusting him to do for you what you cannot do for yourself—forgive your sins and save your soul. You continue in the Christian life the very same way: Day by day you surrender yourself to Christ, open your heart to him, and trust him to do for you what you cannot do for yourself—overcome sin and live a holy life. We are saved by faith, and we live by faith.

Paul tells us to be “rooted in Christ.” If a person has their roots in, for example, a certain community, we mean that community influenced that person. In other words, those roots play a role in determining their values and priorities. We say things like, “You can take the boy out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the boy,” because his roots are firmly entrenched in country values.

Our roots determine our values and priorities; therefore, to be rooted in Christ means that we allow him to determine our values and priorities.

Many Christians try to do good deeds, quit bad habits, start good habits, and be disciplined in their efforts, but they are doomed to fail because they have never placed their roots in Christ. Their roots—their values and priorities—are still in the world, or in themselves, or in their quest for success, but not in Christ.

If you want to establish stability in your Christian life, you must learn to live *in* Christ, not just *for* Christ. Every time we acknowledge that Christ is our only hope of salvation, the roots grow deeper. Every time we open the Bible and allow God to speak to us through his Word, the roots grow deeper. Every time we ask for forgiveness, the roots grow deeper. Every time we yield ourselves completely to him, the roots grow deeper. Every time we allow the Bible to shape the way we think, the roots grow deeper.

You become rooted in Christ by surrendering yourself in faith to Christ; the more you surrender, the deeper the roots grow. We’re saved by faith, and we live by faith. Putting our faith in Christ on a day-to-day basis helps us become rooted in him.

- [Q] Look at Colossians 2:2–3. What purpose does Paul have in writing this letter? What do these two verses have to say about Christ? Why might this motivate us to sink our roots into him?
- [Q] How do we get the firm faith that is mentioned in verse 5?
- [Q] Do you believe you are rooted in Christ? If so, what caused that to happen? If not, what needs to change for that to happen?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us discover what it means to be rooted in Christ.



Activity: Read John 15:1–8. Provide everyone a copy of a simple, pencil-drawn tree. Ask them to write “Jesus Christ” across the trunk. Within the branches, ask them to fill in anything that they think being in Christ will produce in their lives. When they have finished, discuss what they wrote. Also discuss how ridiculous and impossible it would be to produce the branches without the trunk.

Teaching point two: Live in Christ, built up in him.

Look again at Colossians 2:6–7. Secondly, Paul says, “Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and *built up in him*...”

In the Greek, this phrase is written in the present tense. It means that being “built up in Christ” is an on-going process—one that takes time. Maybe you or others expect it to happen immediately. But the fact is, right now you are not perfect, and if you expect perfection of yourself, you are doomed to fail.

God isn’t surprised by your imperfection. He realizes that becoming like Christ is a process that takes time. This does not give us an excuse to sin; it gives us a reason to keep trying. You are God’s project now; he is making you more like Christ, and he will continue that work as long as it takes. Read 1 Corinthians 3:9 and Philipians 1:6.

The expectation of immediate perfection is based on pride. That person wants to say, “Look at what a good person I am!” But God’s attitude is, “You are not perfect, but you will be; I am going to make you perfect. You can’t do it on your own; I will have to do it for you, and it will take time.”

If you want to establish stability in your Christian life, you will have to change the way you interpret your progress. It’s no longer cause for patting yourself on the back and basking in how good you are; it’s a case of recognizing that every battle you win is the result of God’s work in you. Being built up in him requires that you surrender yourself to him and allow him to do his work in you. Living the Christian life is not about living *for* Christ; it’s about living *in* Christ. Living in Christ means that our relationship with him is based on faith in his promise to make us holy and not on our own failures and successes. We are saved by faith, and we live by faith.

- [Q] How can we be built up in Christ? Name as many ways as you can think of.
- [Q] Looking again at 1 Corinthians 3:9, what does it mean that we are God’s field or building? What does that imply about our own attempts to make ourselves holy?
- [Q] According to Philipians 1:6, who is in charge of the whole progress of our Christian growth? Does this mean we should make no effort? If not, what does it mean?
- [Q] Share briefly how you became a Christian. What did you expect God to do for and in you when you first decided to follow him? Were those expectations realistic? Why or why not?



[Q] Which of the following things have most built up your faith in Jesus Christ?

- Reading the Bible
- Praying
- Fellowship with other Christians
- Attending church
- Attending a Bible study
- Meeting with an accountability partner
- Other

Why did you choose the one you did? Did you choose more than one? Was there a big difference in the answers in your group? What does that tell you about how God works in people's lives?

Teaching point three: Live in Christ, strengthened in the faith.

The third phrase in Colossians 2:7 says, “strengthened in the faith as you were taught.”

The cartoon character Popeye wasn't strong. In fact, he was a weakling. Bluto could slap Popeye around all day long, and Popeye couldn't do anything about it. That is, until he ate his spinach. Then, suddenly, Bluto was no match for him. Popeye didn't have any strength in himself; the strength was in the spinach.

In the same way, you don't have any strength in yourself; the strength is in Christ. We enter the Christian life by placing our faith in Christ, which opens the door to God's act of grace—he cleanses us, forgives us, and saves us. And we continue in the Christian life by placing our faith in Christ, which opens the door to God's act of grace—he strengthens us to live a godly life in him.

All you need to win the battle in your daily life is faith in Christ. Christ is your source of strength, and your faith in him is the key that unlocks God's power in your life. As you place your faith in him, your strength increases.

If your idea of living the Christian life is that you will do a bunch of good deeds that will make God love you more, you're missing the point. Living the Christian life is not about living *for* Christ, it's about living *in* Christ. As you begin each day, your focus should not be on whether you will do good or bad deeds; your focus should be on placing your faith entirely in Christ and relying on him to give you the strength to do what you must do. We are saved by faith, and we live by faith. When we put our faith in Christ, we can experience his strength to face any battle that comes our way.

Read Exodus 15:2, 2 Samuel 22:32–33, Nehemiah 8:10, Psalm 28:7, 1 Corinthians 1:25, Philippians 4:13, and 1 Peter 4:11.

[Q] How can the Lord be your strength? Give practical examples from everyday life.



- [Q] What does it mean that God is the Rock? What does that say about his strength compared to our own?
- [Q] How can the joy of the Lord be our strength?
- [Q] Why must we trust in God to gain his strength?
- [Q] What does it imply about our efforts that the weakness of God is stronger than our strength?

Teaching point four: Live in Christ, overflowing with thankfulness.

The fourth phrase in Colossians 2:7 says, “overflowing with thankfulness.” Paul says that we should be overflowing with thankfulness toward Christ for what he has promised to do in our lives. You can begin thanking him now, because he will certainly do what he has promised. You are not perfect yet, but you can be absolutely sure that by his grace you will become like Christ, and you can be thankful today for what he will do in the future. Expressing thankfulness in advance is an act of faith—it means you are trusting in him and not yourself.

Do you remember how it felt when you were first saved? Do you remember how grateful you were when you realized that you had been given something you never could have earned on your own? Do you remember how thankful you were that God, in his mercy, had forgiven you of your sins, cleansed you, and given you a brand new start? The very same sense of gratitude you feel for what Christ has done in the past, you can express for what he will do in the future. God is faithful and will keep his Word. You can be thankful now for what he has promised to do in the future. This is an act of faith, and it is the key to living the Christian life: we were saved by faith, and we live by faith.

- [Q] What reason did David find to give thanks in 1 Chronicles 16:8?
- [Q] Read Nehemiah 12:31. Why would Nehemiah assign two large choirs to give thanks as they worked on building the wall? How would it have benefited the workers?
- [Q] Why did Paul thank God in 1 Corinthians 15:57–58? How do you think that helped him? What about in 2 Corinthians 2:14?
- [Q] Read 1 Thessalonians 5:18. How can we give thanks in all circumstances? What good will that do us?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

If you're losing battles day after day, if your Christian life is up one day and down the next, if it seems impossible for you to establish any kind of stability in your walk with Christ, it could be that you are placing your faith in the wrong person. If your faith is in yourself, you'll never make it.



There's only one way to become a rock-solid believer and to establish stability in your daily walk. You must do the same thing today that you did the day you were saved: put your faith entirely in Christ. Letting him become the root of your existence—centering your values and priorities around him—is an act of faith; trusting him to build you up is an act of faith; relying on his strength is an act of faith; thanking him in advance for finishing his work in you is an act of faith—and when you place your faith in him, he will not let you down.

Action Point: Ask each person in the group to silently think of one area of their lives that they would like to see change. Pray together to be rooted in Christ, be built up in him, access his strength, and be thankful in that area.

—Study by Steve May, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide - Study 4

Think Like a Christian

Everything we need we have in Christ.

Paul says in Colossians 2:8, “See 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.” He then goes on to outline a way of thinking about our relationship with God that is different from anything the world or any other religion teaches. In contrast to what “worldly philosophies” teach, Paul boldly states that everything we need we have in Christ. There are three things in particular that we will look at in this study.

Scripture:

Colossians 2:8–15

Based on:

The “Against the Tide” sermon series by Steve May, PREACHING TODAY SERMONS



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

A few years ago a pseudo-religion began working its way into the American mindset—you can see evidence of it in self-help books, modern music, blockbuster movies, TV sitcom theology, and even in school curricula. This pseudo-religion is commonly referred to as New Age philosophy, and a number of books have warned of a “New Age conspiracy” to undermine all that we hold sacred.

Whether or not you buy the conspiracy theory, there is nothing new about New Age philosophy or any other humanist philosophy currently on the market. They have been around in some form or another for centuries, and they have always challenged the most basic spiritual principles taught in Scripture. Humanist philosophies teach that you only need yourself to achieve personal salvation; the Bible teaches that you cannot do it without Christ.

Another way to say it is that humanist philosophies teach that people are basically good and sin is inconsequential. This kind of thinking can be heard, for example, in Jewel’s music. In the song “Innocence Maintained” she says, “Innocence can’t be lost; it just needs to be maintained.”

Well, Jewel has a nice voice, but she’s no theologian. And anyone who really thinks things through knows that innocence can be lost and that sin is not inconsequential. Anyone who has ever tried knows that we don’t have it in ourselves to save ourselves; we need help. The Bible teaches that people aren’t “basically good”—we have all sinned and fallen short of the mark (Romans 3:23). And though sin is not without consequences, God has provided a way of dealing with sin that destroys its stronghold on our lives once and for all.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] Name some ways our society teaches that everyone is basically good. What evidence do you see that this is not true?

- [Q] Why do some people seem to be good without Christ? What makes them that way? Is such goodness acceptable to God? Why or why not?

- [Q] How would you define sin? Why does it offend God?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: In Christ we have the fullness of God.

In recent years the religion known as Wicca (or neopaganism) has become popular throughout the West. It teaches primarily that the Creation is sacred: the Earth is to be worshiped, and we must all strive to find the God within us; in doing so we become like gods ourselves.



Paul described our relationship with God in simpler and more straightforward terms. Read Colossians 2:8–10. If you want to experience the fullness of God, there is only one way to do it. You don't have to chant, dance, shave your head, mutilate your body, wear a funny robe, or join a club. All you have to do—all that you can do—to experience the fullness of God is to connect with him through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, because Christ is the fullness of God.

When you have a relationship with Christ, you have all that God has to offer. You have access to him any time of the day or night. You can pray to him, sing to him, cry to him, talk to him, or just rest in his presence. When you have a relationship with Christ, you have his Spirit living inside you. His Spirit comforts you, teaches you, guides you, and convicts you of sin so that you can learn to become a better person. When you have a relationship with Christ, you have God on your side. He protects you through the storms of life, and he keeps you safe. When you have a relationship with Christ, you have the assurance that you will be with God in heaven throughout eternity. When you have a relationship with Christ you have it all—there are no additional experiences you need to seek and no additional truth outside of Scripture that you need to discover. In Christ you have the fullness of God.

- [Q] What are some hollow and deceptive philosophies that you hear about regularly today? What makes them hollow and deceptive? How can they take us captive?
- [Q] Why are human tradition and the basic principles of this world (v. 8) so misleading? In what ways is Christ radically different from these two things?
- [Q] What does it mean in your life that Christ is the head over every power and authority (v. 10)?
- [Q] In practical terms, what does it mean that you have been given the fullness of Christ? How does that affect your day-to-day life?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us understand how the fullness of God benefits us.

Activity: Fill a large jar with water and set it in a pan that has high sides. Begin to add rocks one at a time until the water overflows the jar. Discuss how filling our hearts and minds with the things of Christ pushes the sin out of our lives.

Teaching point two: In Christ we have forgiveness of sins.

There's another line in the song by Jewel that says, "To believe in forgiveness, we must first believe in sin." She has a point this time. If you believe you haven't sinned, there is no need to ask for forgiveness. Otherwise, why ask? The fact that God offers us forgiveness is evidence that we need forgiveness. Read Romans 3:23.

There's an old story about a guest preacher who stepped into the pulpit at the church he was visiting and said, "Let me begin with a question. How many of you have ever—at any point in life—said something that wasn't 100 percent accurate?" Of course, everyone raised their hands. He went on to say, "How many of you have ever—at any point in your life—taken something that wasn't yours, such as an ink pen from work, or maybe borrowed something that you didn't



return?” Again, everybody raised their hands. The preacher said, “Okay. Good. Now I know who I’m speaking to—a room full of liars and thieves.”

We have all sinned. None of us is perfect. We’ve all had the same experience: we knew the right thing to do and did the wrong thing anyway, or we knew the right thing to do and did nothing at all. We have all sinned, and we are all in need of God’s forgiveness. Read Colossians 2:11–15.

Read 1 John 1:9. Which of your sins did Christ forgive? The ones you committed in the past, right? What about the ones in the future—the ones you’ll commit tomorrow and the next day? Has he forgiven those? Yes. When he died on the cross, he paid the price for all of your sins. You may ask, “Are you saying that if I commit a sin tomorrow, it’s already guaranteed that I am forgiven?” Yes. “Does that mean I can sin all I want and still be forgiven?” No. Just because your car goes 110 miles an hour doesn’t mean that it’s a good idea to drive it that fast. There are still consequences to deal with. Just because God has promised to forgive your sins doesn’t mean that it’s a good idea to go out and commit sins—there are still consequences to deal with. In fact, if our attitude is “How much can I get away with?” we need to question whether we have really sought Christ’s forgiveness at all. God’s promise of forgiveness does not give us an excuse to sin, but it does give us a reason to feel secure. When we fall short of the mark, we can rest assured that God, in his mercy, will forgive us completely through Christ.

- [Q] Look again at Colossians 2:11. What kind of circumcision is Paul talking about in this verse? What good does this circumcision do us?
- [Q] How should it affect your life that you have the same power available to you that raised Christ from the dead (v. 12)? How can you access that power?
- [Q] Who are the powers and authorities he made a public spectacle of on the cross (v. 15)? Why is this reassuring?
- [Q] Which of the following statements best represents what our attitude should be toward sin?
- I know I will sin, so I don’t worry about it.
 - I know I will sin, but I confess anything that I know is wrong.
 - I know I will sin, and it always devastates me.
 - I know that one day I will reach the point where I quit sinning.

Why did you pick the statement you did? How does that belief affect your life? Which statement is the closest to being true? How do you know?



Teaching point three: In Christ we have freedom from the law.

Reread Colossians 2:14–15. The “written code” refers to the Law in the Old Testament—the list of do’s and don’ts that we all try to live by. The problem with the Law is that it refuses to grade on the curve. A 92 percent may get you an A in school, but it doesn’t work like that here. Read James 2:10.

That’s bad news! No one can keep the law 100 percent of the time. Of course, God understands this, and through Christ he offers a new way of “keeping score.” Through Christ we have been forgiven, and through Christ God has done away with the “written code” that only served to condemn us and has given us a new law to live by: the law of love.

When you accept Christ as your Savior, you are no longer judged by your ability (or lack thereof) to keep the law. You are judged by the righteousness of Christ. When he died on the cross, all of your failures were crucified with him. You no longer have to pay the price for your sins; Christ paid the price. Your salvation is no longer dependent upon your ability to keep the law.

Does that mean you don’t have to try to be good? Of course not. But it does mean that our relationship to the list of do’s and don’ts has changed. The law is no longer a threat; it is now a goal. When we fall short of the mark we are forgiven, but the idea is that we get back up and try again—and keep trying until God has made us holy. Read 1 Corinthians 6:12.

- [Q] What does it mean that God has cancelled the written code that opposed us (v. 14)? Why does it never ultimately work to just make a bunch of rules for ourselves?
- [Q] What do you think James 2:20 means? How does this show us our complete need for Christ?
- [Q] What does it mean that everything is permissible (1 Corinthians 6:12)? According to that verse, how can we decide what we should engage in or not? What should be our measure of whether something is beneficial or not? How can we know if we are being mastered by something?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

In Christ we have everything we need—God’s fullness, unconditional forgiveness, and total freedom. All the things that worldly philosophies try to promise, God has delivered. You don’t have to pretend that sin doesn’t exist. You don’t have to try to talk yourself into not feeling guilty. You can acknowledge these things and turn them over to Christ, and he will forgive you—without fail. This gives you total freedom—not freedom to sin, but freedom to strive to become like Jesus.

Action Point: Think about one thing that is master over you. Spend time in silent prayer asking God to give you his power in that area. If anyone would like to ask for prayer from the group, feel free to do that also.

—Study by Steve May, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide - Study 5

Spiritual Self-Defense

Connect to Christ and allow him to become the focus of your existence.

When Paul wrote the Book of Colossians, he was giving first-century Christians a guide to living in a non-Christian culture. In our last study, we talked about how to think like a Christian, and Paul showed us that in Christ we have the fullness of God, forgiveness of sins, and freedom from the law. In this study, Paul gives us a course in spiritual self-defense; he shows us how to protect ourselves from thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes that put us at risk spiritually. This study covers three primary pitfalls to avoid.

Scripture:

Colossians 2:16–23

Based on:

The "Against the Tide" sermon series by Steve May, PREACHING TODAY SERMONS



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

When it comes to the subject of losing weight, there's a smorgasbord of opinions on the market. (Forgive the pun.) The frustrating thing is that anyone who has looked into it has heard a number of conflicting opinions from people who—by all reasonable expectations—should agree. After all, they're experts. They have similar degrees from similar universities and have devoted their lives to a similar cause—but that's where the similarities end. From that point on, you will hear conflicting opinions. Again, the frustrating thing about this is that they are not disagreeing on minor issues, such as whether you should eat your broccoli steamed or boiled. They disagree on the major issues.

For example, the Fit for Life diet tells you that you can eat all the fruit and vegetables you want, but stay away from meat. The Sugar Busters diet says you can eat meat, but stay away from sugar. The Fat-Free diet says you can eat sugar, but stay away from fat. The Carbohydrate Addicts diet says you can eat fat, but stay away from carbohydrates. All of these experts can support their claims with facts and figures (again, forgive the pun), yet everyone knows that Americans are more obese than ever before.

The foolproof weight-loss plan, however, is in the San Diego Adult Learning Center seminar catalog. It was actually a misprint; the seminar was supposed to be called "How to Lose Weight Without Dieting." Instead, they inadvertently called it, "How to Lose Weight Without Eating." Now that is a weight-loss plan that will work, but I don't imagine many of us will sign up for it.

Just as there are a number of conflicting opinions and beliefs in the area of weight-loss, there are a number of conflicting ideas in the area of religion and spirituality. Of course, everyone knows that various denominations believe different things—but for the most part, our different beliefs are insignificant. However, when you compare the beliefs of Christianity with those of other religions, you will see that the differences are major.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] What do you think is the main difference between Christianity and other religions?

- [Q] Have you ever been a part of another religion? If so, tell us what made you leave it.

- [Q] Are you ever tempted to forsake Christianity? If so, why?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Don't get sideswiped.

If you've ever been sideswiped in a vehicle, you know how it takes you completely unaware. You often hear people say, "That car came out of nowhere."



Paul warns us that there are people out there who will do the very same thing spiritually. You may think you're moving forward in your Christian life, doing what God wants you to do, when all of a sudden—POW—somebody blindsides you and tells you that you are all wrong. Read Colossians 2:16–17.

In the first century (just like today), there were some differing opinions about religious rituals. Jewish Christians were in the habit of observing special days and seasons. Some continued to observe the Sabbath. Other believers—especially Gentile Christians—didn't observe these special days, but they had a debate of their own regarding food sacrificed to idols. In this non-Christian culture, people would bring food to the pagan temples to be offered in sacrifice to the gods. After it was sacrificed, it was sold at a discount in the market next to the temple. So, some questions that early Christians struggled with were: *Is it okay to eat food that has been sacrificed to idols? Is it okay to work on the Sabbath? Is it okay to eat pork? Is it okay if you don't observe the Jewish holidays? Is it okay if you observe a secular holiday?* Paul didn't choose sides on this debate. Read Romans 14:5.

Of course, this wasn't good enough for some people. There were some who had appointed themselves "Sabbath Police" or "Kosher Cops," and when they saw other Christians doing things they disagreed with, they would lay a guilt trip on them and say something to the effect of, "If you were really a Christian, you wouldn't be eating that food." Or, "If you were really a Christian, you would observe the Sabbath." Some people on both sides of the argument had a tendency to judge everyone who didn't agree with them exactly, even on these minor issues.

So Paul said to the Colossians, "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink..." and in Romans, "Be fully convinced in [your] own mind." You must learn not to let other people judge you in non-essential matters. You must be convinced in your own mind that you are being obedient to God's call on your life. Paul says you have to do this to protect yourself spiritually, or else some zealot will come along and blindside you when you least expect it—and if you base your Christian life on the opinions of others, your faith will falter. Read Romans 14:12.

- [Q] What are some things that sideswipe your faith?
- [Q] What are some modern-day examples that would be similar to the things Paul listed in Colossians 2:16?
- [Q] Have you ever been confused by rules other Christians have tried to impose on you? Does that mean we should have no rules for our lives? How can we find a balance?
- [Q] How can we become fully convinced in our own mind about what is right (Romans 14:5)?

Teaching point two: Don't get sidelined.

It's a tragedy when athletes are sidelined and unable to play out the season—like Terrell Davis, who was injured and unable to finish the season for the Broncos, or Kirby Puckett, who had to retire from baseball because he has glaucoma.



Paul warns us not to let this happen to us in our spiritual life. Read Colossians 2:18.

Paul is referring to the tendency some Christians have to run in theological circles, debating and arguing every issue, and, as a result, becoming virtually useless in their Christian life. These people aren't involved in ministry; they're not feeding the poor, ministering to the sick, or evangelizing the lost. Instead, they're arguing with people over things that don't matter. This type of person's problem is laid out in Colossians 2:19.

In other words, they've become ineffectual as Christians. They're no longer growing spiritually; they're just accumulating information. If you allow yourself to get pulled into their pattern, you, too, run the risk of being sidelined.

We cannot afford to forget that our primary purpose is to serve Christ by serving others. We continue to grow only as long as we stay connected to Christ. Don't be sidelined by non-essentials. Don't allow anything to prevent you from pursuing the calling God has placed on your life. You must stay in the battle because there is much you can accomplish for the glory of God. To do the work he has called you to do, you must stay connected to Christ. You must continue to grow as a believer, and Christ must always remain the focus of your life. Don't get disqualified for the prize. Don't allow yourself to get sidelined.

- [Q] What kinds of things tend to sideline you in your faith?
- [Q] What do you think Paul is talking about in Colossians 2:18? What might be some modern-day examples of this?
- [Q] How do people lose connection with Christ, the Head (v. 19)? How does that keep us from growing in our faith?
- [Q] What are the ligaments and sinews that keep us connected to the Head (v. 19)?

Teaching point three: Don't get sidetracked.

There are some people who think the Christian faith can be summarized in a list of don'ts. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Paul says the people who emphasize the don'ts are worldly. Read Colossians 2:20–23.

Paul warns Christians not to get sidetracked into over-emphasizing the do's and don'ts, since that is not the emphasis of the Christian life, which is fellowship with Christ. Our temptation, however, is to reduce Christianity to nothing more than a list of do's and don'ts. However, rules do not create morality; having rules in the head is no substitute for obedience from the heart.

Sheep get lost by nibbling away at the grass and never looking up. We have the same tendency. If our focus is only the rules—and how well we perform—we get sidetracked. When we place all of our attention on ourselves and our ability to keep the rules, we lose sight of Christ. It's not about abiding by a checklist; it's about abiding in Christ. The Christian life is not a set of rules; it's a relationship. Don't allow yourself to get sidetracked.



A couple was having marital problems, so the husband gave his wife a list of all the things she should do every day to be a “good wife.” Each item had a box by it, which she would check as she performed that task. One was “Compliment Jim.” As soon as she got the daily compliment out of the way, she marked it off her list. The problem was that once she had checked all of her boxes, she had the idea that she was “free” from Jim for the rest of the day. One evening she wanted to go out with her friends and Jim asked her to stay home and spend time with him. Her response was, “I’ve done everything on the list today. I can go out with my friends if I want to.” Jim had his own list as well, and as he performed each task he would mark it off. Many times their arguments centered around each one’s ability to keep up with the items on their list. Not surprisingly, their marriage ended in divorce. It wasn’t because she didn’t do everything on her list, or he didn’t do everything on his. It was because they both became sidetracked into thinking that marriage could be reduced to a list of rules. Is it a good idea to compliment your spouse every day? Of course. Is it a good idea to say “I love you” every day? Of course. But there is more to it than that. A successful marriage is based on a relationship with a foundation of love, commitment, and trust.

In the same way, our Christian life is based on a relationship with Christ. Don’t get sidetracked into thinking it can be reduced to a list of rules.

- [Q] Why are we tempted to reduce the Christian life to a list of rules? Why won’t this work?
- [Q] What are some rules Christians add that are not found in Scripture? Name as many as you can think of.
- [Q] Look again at Colossians 2:23. Why do rules look so wise? What about this makes them harder to think through clearly?
- [Q] Why are we tempted to make the Christian life more difficult than it is?
- [Q] Why is it so satisfying to measure our Christian lives by outward accomplishments?

Optional Activity

Purpose: *To help us to learn to focus on Christ rather than on rules.*

Activity: *Advise the following people on how they should make the right decision in each of their situations.*

- *Marcus is a new Christian. A more mature believer asked him if he had been baptized properly. This believer insisted that Marcus’s baptism didn’t count unless he had been baptized by an ordained priest.*
- *Georgie belonged to the Goth movement when she became a Christian. She now has a lot of tattoos and piercings. She is having trouble fitting into the church she’s attending in her small town.*
- *Troy loves to dance, but his church teaches that this is wrong.*



PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Paul summarizes this passage of Scripture in verse 17 when he says, “The reality, however, is found in Christ.”

This is how you protect yourself spiritually. You connect to Christ and allow him to become the focus of your existence. Living the Christian life is the process of growing closer to Christ. Don't let anything stand in the way of your relationship with Jesus. Don't get sideswiped; don't let people judge you—Christ is your judge. Don't get sidelined; don't allow yourself to stop growing as a Christian—our purpose is to serve Christ and glorify him. Don't get sidetracked; the Christian life is not about rules—it's about maintaining a relationship with Jesus. This is our best spiritual defense.

Action Point: Write down all the rules you impose on yourself as a Christian. Look at the list prayerfully and consider your motives for doing what you do. Ask yourself why you impose that rule on yourself and pray about whether it is valid or not.

—Study by Steve May, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide - Study 6

Living with a Focus

To win the inner civil war, you have to set your heart and mind on Christ.

This study looks at three things that often stand in the way of our living a focused, Christ-centered life. If you're not careful, these three obstacles will disrupt your life, drive a wedge between your heart and your head, and prevent you from living a committed, focused Christian life. But Paul shows us how to overcome each one.

Scripture:

Colossians 3:1-11

Based on:

The "Against the Tide" sermon series by Steve May, PREACHING TODAY SERMONS



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

When a country goes to war against itself, as America did during the 1860s, it becomes impossible for the country to thrive. The entire focus of the nation shifts from moving forward to dealing with conflicting ideals and values. Sometimes a nation is able to recover from a civil war and get back on track (as happened in America); sometimes, even after the fighting has supposedly ended, the country remains divided and embittered—slowing further the recovery process (as we have seen happen in countries such as Chad and Vietnam).

Civil War can also sidetrack businesses, sports teams, political campaigns, marriages, families, churches, and entire denominations. Jesus said that a house divided against itself cannot stand (Matthew 12:25). That statement has proven true countless times throughout history.

It is equally true in your personal life. If you wage a civil war against yourself, ultimately your life will fall apart. You cannot thrive as long as there is conflict in your personal life over what your values and priorities are.

Read Colossians 3:1–2. This is the crucial principle in winning the inner civil war. It requires that we live with a focus. It means that your head and your heart have to be moving in the same direction, or inner conflict will erupt. If your heart doesn't want the same things your head says it does, you will have a difficult time staying focused. Our heart—our desires—must be directed toward “things above,” the things of God. Our mind—our intellect, thought life, and belief system—must also be directed toward the things of God. Otherwise, our lives will spin out of control.

Many people are trying to live their lives with conflicting values, and it causes a great deal of stress. People want to be happily married, but they also want to be able to flirt with people they are attracted to. People want to be successful in business, but they also want to be able to watch TV daily, golf every week, and take long vacations. People have a sincere desire to be more spiritual and develop a closer relationship with God, but they also want to be independent, chart their own course, and follow their own dreams. These desires are in conflict with one another—becoming closer to God requires that you abandon your dreams for your life and pursue his. It means instead of being your own boss, you allow Christ to be the boss of your life.

Jesus pinpointed this problem when he said, “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24). People who struggle with an inner civil war are attempting to do that, and it will never work. It leads to self-destruction.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] What kinds of civil wars do you battle within yourself? How does it affect your walk with Christ?

- [Q] How can you get your head and heart to move in the same direction? Name practical things that have worked for you.



PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Do not hang on to the past.

Paul says that when you become a Christian, you say goodbye to sin. When you make a decision to follow Christ, you agree to leave behind the old way of life and begin living in a whole new way. It's not a question of, "How many sins can I commit and still make it to heaven?" It's a question of, "How can I eliminate sin completely from my life?" When you give your life to Christ, you leave the past behind.

It's like a marriage vow: "Forsaking all others I pledge myself only to you." As far as dating goes, the couple takes themselves out of circulation. The possibility of pursuing romantic relationships is now part of the past they have left behind. In the song "Hey Good Looking," Hank Williams described it this way: "I'm going to throw my date book over the fence and buy me one for five or ten cents. I'll keep it till it's covered with age, because I'm writing your name down on every page."

This is the way we should approach our relationship with Christ. All of the things we pursued before we met Jesus—our dreams, our goals, our desires—are ancient history. Now we have a new way of thinking, a new focus in life. We have to say goodbye once and for all to everything in our past that did not include Christ. Our focus from now on must be on the new life we have in him.

Read Colossians 2:20 and 3:1–8. Paul is saying, "Let go of the past! The things you used to do and the things you used to live for must be forgotten. You have a new life now."

As long as you hang on to the past, you will never be able to win your civil war. Whenever you find yourself wanting to do something you shouldn't want to do, you have to remind yourself: "That part of my life is in the past. That's the old me, and that person is dead. Now I have a new life with new goals, values, and responsibilities. Christ is now the center of my life. If I can't include him in what I want to do, then I won't do it."

- [Q] In what ways do you still belong to the world and submit to its rules (Colossians 2:20)?
- [Q] What are some practical ways you can set your heart and mind on Christ (Colossians 3:1–2)? How does it help to realize that you are raised with Christ?
- [Q] What does Paul mean when he says we have died (v. 3)? How should that affect our thinking? Our behavior?
- [Q] How does practicing these things help us leave the past behind? Why is it so necessary to do so?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us to leave the past behind.

Activity: Provide everyone with a note card and envelope. Instruct them to write a thank-you note to God in gratefulness for all the things he has done for them. When they are finished, ask them to seal it in the envelope and take it home. The next time they are tempted



to go back to their old sinful habits, they can open the note and read it again to remind them of why that would be a mistake.

Teaching point two: Don't mix up your priorities.

In verse 4 Paul says that Christ is our life. This means he is our top priority.

A young man was given a sticker at Christmas that said, "Music is Life." He put the sticker on his guitar case, but he crossed out "Music" and wrote over it with a magic marker, "Christ." It now says, "Christ is Life."

One thing that prevents us from living a focused life is our tendency to forget what really is important. I may love music, but music isn't my life. I may love football, but football isn't my life. I may love shopping, but shopping isn't my life. To win the inner civil war, we must determine what our priorities are and remain focused on them.

Those who keep their priorities in order keep their lives in order. People who have happy marriages have made their marriage a priority. Those who are in excellent physical shape have made their health a priority. People who have a great relationship with their children have made them a priority.

Read Colossians 3:4. Christ isn't merely your top priority; he is your life. He is your source of life. Whatever you need, you can ask for. Read 1 John 5:14-15.

When it comes to winning the inner civil war there are two things you can ask for that you know are God's will for your life:

- a) Ask God to change your heart, to take away your desires and replace them with his. Read Psalm 37:4.
- b) Ask God to give you the strength to do right regardless of how you feel. You can say, "God, my heart doesn't want what my head knows that it should; give me the strength to do right anyway."

- [Q] How have your priorities changed since you have been walking with Christ?
- [Q] Thinking about the sticker "Music is Life." What would your sticker say? Have you been able to cross out that word and replace it with Christ? Why or why not?
- [Q] Have you ever experienced God changing your heart's desire? If so, tell us about it.
- [Q] Have you ever experienced God giving you the strength to do what you didn't want to do? If so, how did it turn out?

Teaching point three: Don't underestimate the destructive power of sin.

Read Colossians 3:5-11. Paul offers a list of sins to avoid. His point is that all sin is destructive, and living a focused, Christ-centered life requires abandoning the desire to hang on to our sins.

As long as you believe some sins can be overlooked, you will continue to lose the inner civil war. If you believe there are sins you can commit that are anything less than absolutely destructive,



you will continue to fail in the Christian life. Sin is sin, and it is all destructive. When we fail to recognize this simple truth, we open the door to disaster.

For example, a man who would never dream of cheating on his wife might not give it a second thought when he completely demoralizes her with angry words. A woman who would never in a thousand years commit a sexual sin might think nothing about slandering another person or saying something malicious to her face.

Sin is sin. No matter what shape or size it comes in, it is always destructive and must be avoided at all costs. If you want your head and heart to move in the same direction, you cannot be wishy-washy about right and wrong: you have to declare war on sin.

If you hold yourself to a higher standard—if you refuse to participate in gossip, tell white lies, or speak hatefully to others and so on—many of the inner conflicts you currently struggle with will simply disappear. Your heart and head will start moving in the right direction.

[Q] What do you think it means to declare war on sin? What would that look like in your life?

[Q] In verse 5, Paul calls these sins idolatry. What makes them idolatrous?

[Q] In Colossians 3:5–9, Paul lists a lot of different sins. What would be the purpose of such a list? What was he trying to impress upon us?

[Q] Which of the following statements best reflects your attitude about sin?

- We all sin, so it's no big deal. God expects it of us.
- When I sin, I'm devastated. I spend weeks in mourning, hoping for God's forgiveness.
- When I sin, I repent, asking God to forgive me and change me.
- I confess most sins, but there are a few I refuse to confess because I don't want to change.

Which statement best represents what our attitude should be? How can we change our attitude to reflect that statement?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

This is the kind of life God desires for you. He wants you to be focused on him. He doesn't want any obstacle to stand in the way of your ability to ultimately appear with Christ in glory. Don't let the past, mixed-up priorities, or sin hold you back. Set your heart and mind on the things of God and experience the joy of a focused, Christ-centered life.

Action Point: Which teaching point do you most need to apply to your life? Close by praying for the one each person mentioned.

—Study by Steve May, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide - Study 7

When People Rub You the Wrong Way

God wants us to live together in unity.

This study will look at how to get along with difficult people. If you're on the receiving end of someone's cold shoulder, these principles will help you defuse difficult situations. And if you're on the giving end, we'll talk about how you can stop the cycle and make things right. God wants us to live together in unity; Colossians 3:12–17 shows us how.

Scripture:

Colossians 3:12–17

Based on:

The "Against the Tide" sermon series by Steve May, PREACHING TODAY SERMONS



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Much of the Christian life comes down to how well we get along with other people. Scripture makes it plain that God places tremendous value on unity, which Paul stressed repeatedly throughout his letters. The ability to get along with others requires a great deal of effort. Our natural tendency is not to get along—even when things are going great.

When Jimmy Johnson took over as coach of the Dallas Cowboys, they had been on a downward spiral. But within a few years he rebuilt the organization and took them to the Super Bowl—and won. The next year he did it again. After winning his second Super Bowl, what did owner Jerry Jones do? Give Jimmy Johnson a raise? No, he fired him! Together they had rebuilt the Cowboy dynasty and had accomplished the seemingly impossible, but they couldn't get along. Winning wasn't compensation enough, and Texas wasn't big enough for both men's massive egos, so they parted company. This serves to remind us that even when things are going well, it's hard to maintain unity.

As you go through life, some people will rub you the wrong way. Also, there will be times when you find that you rub someone else the wrong way.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] What traits in other people usually bother you? Do you tend to write off people who have those kinds of traits before you get to know them? Why or why not?

- [Q] Do you have any qualities that tend to scare people off right away? How have you reacted when you are treated that way? Can this trait be changed? If so, would you want to change it?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Take the high road.

Read Colossians 3:12. Paul reminds us that we are God's chosen people, dearly loved by him and expected to live holy lives. This is our identity, and it should determine how we act. When we relate to other people, we should say to ourselves, "I don't know where this person is spiritually, but I want my attitudes and actions to reflect Christ." If others want to stir up trouble, that's their choice. You can take the high road to solving the conflict instead of getting even.

Taking the high road is a lot easier to do when you remember that you're not perfect either. You've made some mistakes. You've gotten your hands dirty. You know what it's like to need forgiveness. Read Colossians 3:13.

A couple was having problems in their marriage. He was fed up with her and ready to leave, and had many well-documented reasons for wanting to go. As a last-ditch effort, she persuaded



him to try one counseling session. During the session he gave a list of reasons why he couldn't go on in the marriage. After a few minutes of this, the pastor said, "So, what is your contribution to the problems in this marriage?"

"My contribution?"

"Right. What have you done to make things more difficult for her?"

After some thought he said, "Well, I'm not very patient."

"Okay. What else?"

He stared at the pastor and finally said, "I have a hair-trigger temper, and I yell sometimes."

"Okay. What else?"

She said, "Well, he doesn't always do what he says he's going to do."

The pastor stopped her. "Hang on a minute ... this is his list. Let him tell me."

He said, "Well, she's right. I'm always promising to take her out on the weekend, and I never do."

"Okay. What else?"

Suddenly a new element had been added to the mix: humility. He realized he had been making her as miserable as she had been making him. He went from seeing himself as the victim to seeing himself, to a certain extent, as the perpetrator. From that day on their marriage was different. They began seeing a professional marriage counselor every week and were able to work out their differences. Their marriage was saved when they each began to take the high road and forgive one another as Christ had forgiven them.

That's what it means to take the high road. Show others the same mercy you have been shown by Christ. Does this mean we sweep conflict under the rug and never deal with it? No, of course not. But it means that we don't resort to name calling and hostility toward those who don't agree with us. You are one of God's people; let your actions show it.

[Q] How should the fact that we are God's chosen people affect our actions?

[Q] What do you think it means to bear with each other (v. 13)?

[Q] How much would you have to forgive someone else to forgive as the Lord forgave you (v. 13)?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us think through how to take the high road.

Activity: Ask the group to advise each of the following people on how they can take the high road.

- *Shyra, who is an African American in a mostly white school, is almost never invited to any social event. Her anger is growing.*



- *Brandon, who is on staff in a small country church, wants to do a film festival as an outreach with the youth. Many of the older people in the church are horrified and want him to leave the church.*
- *Clive is in a wheelchair. The neighborhood children often make fun of him.*

Teaching point two: Your actions are more important than your feelings.

Colossians 3:12 says, “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” Paul used the phrase “clothe yourselves” because sometimes you have to cover your feelings by “putting on” the right behavior. Your feelings may be sending you in one direction, but you can clothe yourself with attitudes and behavior that move you in the right direction.

We’ve been lied to about our feelings. We’ve been told that if we feel something it must be real, and that we should get our feelings out in the open so that we can deal with them. Spitting out a bunch of hostile, angry, mean, resentful words at someone is not going to help. It is not going to make you or them a better person, and it won’t improve your relationship. Just because you feel something doesn’t mean you have to say it, and you don’t have to let your feelings control your actions.

Paul said, “Put on compassion, kindness, ... gentleness.” You may not feel these things, but you can “put them on”—at least temporarily. If you feel dislike for another person and show them kindness, you’re not being hypocritical; you’re being holy.

The Bible never tells us that we will be judged according to our feelings. It says we are judged according to our actions. You can’t always control the way you feel, but you can control the way you dress. Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Does this mean you sweep conflict with others under the rug? No. It means that when you deal with conflict, you put your feelings aside and put a layer of holiness between you and the other person, so you can heal your relationship instead of destroying it.

Read Jeremiah 6:16, Micah 6:8, Luke 6:27–28, 2 Corinthians 9:8, and Galatians 6:9–10.

- [Q] How might Jeremiah 6:16 help your attitude when dealing with a difficult person?
- [Q] What does Micah 6:8 tell us about how we should treat others?
- [Q] Notice what Jesus says about our actions rather than our feelings in Luke 6:27–28. What are someone’s feelings like in such a situation? How can we realistically deal with our feelings toward someone who hates and mistreats us? How might our actions turn our feelings around? If you’ve ever experienced such a phenomenon, share about it.
- [Q] How does God’s grace (2 Cor. 9:8) help us to abound in good works?
- [Q] According to Galatians 6:9–10, what is a further motivation to treating others well?



[Q] Which of the following statements describe a healthy way to handle our feelings?

- If I'm upset, I try to pretend I'm really happy instead.
- If I'm upset, I try to show kindness anyway.
- If I'm upset, I let the person know it, but in a kind way.
- If I'm upset, I blow it out, but later apologize.
- If I'm upset, I become quiet and no one ever knows.

Teaching point three: Include Christ in every conversation.

If you're having a conversation with someone and angry words are about to explode out of you, ask yourself, "What would Jesus say right now?" If you're talking to friends and an outsider becomes the topic of conversation, ask yourself, "What would Jesus say about this person?" You may not always know what Jesus would say, but you'll almost always know what he wouldn't say!

The definition of gossip is saying something negative about someone who isn't there. Even if it's true, even if he deserves it, even if it is presented in the form of a prayer request—it's gossip.

There is a big difference between telling someone, "John Smith resigned from his job and is moving to Tupelo," and saying, "Did you hear? John Smith was forced to resign and the Smiths are losing their house! The way I heard it, he ran his department into the ground, and the company was losing money hand-over-fist, so they gave him the boot and now he's had to take a lower-paying job in Tupelo, and I don't think Mary will stay with him because have you ever noticed that she thinks she has to impress everyone with how much money they have, and she's always saying where she bought this dress or that outfit and I just wonder what she'll say now..." You see the difference. Read Proverbs 20:19.

We need to make sure our conversation is filled with words that lift people up instead of tearing them down. Read Colossians 3:14–16. Paul is saying, "Include Christ in every conversation." Ask yourself, "What would Jesus say?" Does this mean all of our conversations become nothing but fluff, and we sweep all conflict under the rug? No. It means that when we have conflict, we should discuss it with no one but the person involved. Otherwise, we keep quiet.

- [Q]** Why do people gossip? Why is gossip so destructive?
- [Q]** How can prayer requests become a form of gossip?
- [Q]** How can putting on love (v. 14) protect us from harmful words?
- [Q]** How can the word of Christ (v. 16) transform our words?
- [Q]** How can a grateful heart help our speech (v. 16)?



Teaching point four: Pursue personal peace.

The key to developing peace in our relationships is to develop peace within ourselves first. Critics are not happy. Gossips are not full of the joy of the Lord. People who constantly stir up tension in relationships do it because they have no peace within themselves; and people who have peace have no desire to stir things up. Look again at Colossians 3:15.

If you have not personally experienced the peace of God, which passes all understanding, then it's no wonder that your relationships are rocky. You can't give to someone else what you don't have. The Bible promises that we can experience the overwhelming presence of God's peace. Read Isaiah 26:3, John 14:1, and Philippians 4:7.

Paul also reminds us that peace is the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). If other people frequently disappoint you ... if your employees do more things wrong than they do right ... if your children get on your nerves all the time ... if you notice when other people don't do their job ... if your spouse doesn't live up to your expectations, maybe the source of the problem can be traced to the fact that you aren't experiencing the peace of God in your life.

Once you experience God's peace, you will lose all interest in conflict, you will lose any desire to be judgmental, and you will lose the tendency to be on edge.

- [Q] How can you let the peace of Christ rule in your heart (v. 15)? Give practical examples.
- [Q] How can trust in God lead to peace?
- [Q] In what ways does the peace of God transcend understanding? If you've ever experienced this phenomenon, tell us about it.
- [Q] How does such peace guard our hearts and minds?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Getting along with others may not always be easy, but it's possible. It happens when you make an effort. Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart, and you will be less likely to be rubbed the wrong way.

Of course, you still might rub them the wrong way—even without trying. When that happens, take the high road, remember that your actions are more important than your feelings, include Christ in every conversation, and let the peace of Christ rule in your heart.

Action Point: Think of one relationship that you need to apply these principles to. Ask the group to pray for your relationship with that person.

—Study by Steve May, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide - Study 8

What You Do Comes Back to You

If you do right or wrong, you will be paid in kind.

The Bible teaches that what you do in this life comes back to you in this life—and the one to come.

If you do right, you will be paid for doing right; if you do wrong, you will be paid for doing wrong. If we believe this principle, and live accordingly, then our lives will reflect the results. In Colossians 3, Paul highlights three areas where we can see this principle at work in our lives. This study will take a closer look at each one.

Scripture:

Colossians 3:18–4:1

Based on:

The "Against the Tide" sermon series by Steve May, PREACHING TODAY SERMONS



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Karma is a popular term these days. Compton's dictionary says that karma is "the totality of a person's actions in any one of the successive stages of that person's existence, thought of determining the fate of the next stage."

In other words, how you behave in this incarnation determines your state of life in the next incarnation. People who believe in karma won't do certain things in this life because they fear they will have to pay for them in the life to come; by the same token, they do certain things in this life thinking they will be rewarded for them in their next incarnation.

Some people think the Bible teaches karma, but it doesn't. However, the belief in karma is basically a distortion of a biblical principle that we see taught throughout Scripture: What you do comes back to you. In other words, you reap in this life what you sow in this life. And it teaches that what you do comes back to you in eternity. In other words, you reap in eternity what you sow in this life.

The Bible teaches that you live and die once, and after that comes the judgment (Hebrews 9:27). There are no successive incarnations as one journeys toward Nirvana; you have one life to live, and you must make the most of it.

Paul mentioned this on more than one occasion. Read Galatians 6:7–8 and Colossians 3:25.

If you do right you will be paid for doing right; if you do wrong you will be paid for doing wrong. This is a rule to live by—a principle to build our lives on. If we believe this principle, and live accordingly, then our lives will reflect the results.

Discussion starters:

[Q] What is the difference between karma and what Scripture teaches?

[Q] If you've experienced the principles talked about in Galatians 6:7–8 and Colossians 3:25, share that with us.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: What you do comes back to you in your personal life.

Read Colossians 3:18–21. Paul begins this passage by saying something that has become quite controversial in recent years: "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."

The pastor of a church in San Diego read this passage. Someone put a note in the offering plate saying, "When you consider how women have been oppressed for centuries, how could you read from the pulpit a text that serves only to perpetuate that oppression?"



Today, Paul's words sound politically incorrect. The truth is, they were politically incorrect in his day as well, but for a completely different reason. In Paul's day women were considered possessions. They were, quite frankly, expendable. When a man died, his inheritance went to his son, not his wife. A man could have as many wives as he wished, but a woman could have only one husband. A man could divorce his wife for any reason at all, but a woman could not initiate a divorce from her husband. Women weren't allowed to hold political office or pursue a career. They were, in pagan Roman society, second-class citizens. A slave could be given his freedom and eventually become a Roman citizen with full rights of citizenship, but a woman could not.

Then, along came Christianity, and the role and status of women in society changed. Christianity offered a radical view of humanity. Read Galatians 3:28.

Christianity's influence has made a positive difference in the role of women. Even today, in societies within Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, or India, for example, women don't have the status they deserve. Christianity seeks to elevate women.

Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands, and then he says, "Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them." He then tells children to "obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord." And to fathers he says, "Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged."

In other words, our relationships should be defined by two things: 1) We should act with integrity toward others; and 2) We should treat others with respect. Failure to do this results in sour relationships, because what you do comes back to you. A wife who sows strife with her husband reaps a rocky marriage. A husband who is harsh and unloving toward his wife finds himself in a desperately unhappy situation. Children who disobey their parents become unhappy, and fathers who embitter their children eventually discover that their children don't want to be around them.

The way you treat others impacts the relationships you have with them. If your relationship is defined by love and encouragement, it will prosper. If it is defined by anger and disapproval, it will fall apart at the seams.

- [Q] What do you think Paul meant when he instructed wives to submit to their husbands? Explain it as you understand it.
- [Q] Why do you think Paul commanded husbands to love their wives? What does it do to a woman's heart to be loved?
- [Q] How can fathers avoid embittering their children (some translations say "exasperate" instead of "embitter")? Why would that discourage their children?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us discover how to apply this passage.



Activity: Advise the following people on how they can show integrity and respect in their relationships.

- Sharon would like a new kitchen, but her husband would like a new sports car.
- Mike would like to take a new job two states away, but his wife would like to stay where they are because they are close to her family.
- Peter would like to go on a mission project this summer, but his parents want him to earn money for college.

Teaching point two: What you do comes back to you in your work life.

Read Colossians 3:22–24. If you take out the word *slave* and insert the word *employee*, you will discover all you need to know about being a model worker: Do your job well even when no one is watching.

Paul isn't saying, "Work hard to impress your boss." He's saying, "Work hard, even when your boss isn't looking." Verse 24 tells us what will be the result.

On the other side of the coin, Paul issues a challenge to masters (or employers). Read Colossians 4:1.

Whether you are a "master" or a "slave," your approach to your job should be characterized by two things: 1) Do your job with integrity regardless of who is watching; and 2) Treat the people who work with you, for you, or above you with the respect they deserve.

Read how Paul summarizes the proper work ethic in verse 23: Work with all your heart, as working for the Lord. Even if your boss doesn't have the sense to give you the reward you deserve, God does and will.

- [Q] How could you apply verse 22 to your job? Give practical examples.
- [Q] How would knowing that you're working for the Lord and not for men help your attitude?
- [Q] What kind of inheritance does Paul mean in verse 24? Why should that be enough to keep us going?
- [Q] How might remembering that we have a Master in heaven make an employer more compassionate toward his employees?

Teaching point three: What you do comes back to you in your spiritual life.

Look again at Colossians 3:25. You cannot sin and get away with it. There will be a day of reckoning. Some may say, "Wait a minute. What about forgiveness? What about grace? What about mercy?"

When we ask God for forgiveness, he forgives us—without fail. The Bible is clear on that matter (1 John 1:9; Proverbs 28:13; Psalm 32:2). But don't mistake escaping the penalty of sin with escaping the results of sin. Sin brings about its own punishment, and the results of sin cannot be avoided.



For example, if you cheat on your income tax, God will forgive you when you come to him in repentance. However, you'll still have to deal with the IRS. If you cheat on your spouse, God will forgive you for breaking his law, but you still have to deal with the effect your infidelity has on your marriage. If you neglect your children and abdicate your responsibility as a parent, God will forgive you, but you still have to deal with the damage your actions have caused.

This is not God's way of getting even; it's simply the way the world works. Your actions have consequences. If you do right, you will be paid for doing right. If you do wrong, you will be paid for doing wrong. What you do comes back to you.

- [Q] Give an example of when you found God's forgiveness for your sin but still had to deal with the consequences.
- [Q] How does knowing that we are forgiven ease the pain of the consequences?
- [Q] What does it mean that God does not show favoritism?
- [Q] Explain what's wrong with each of the following statements.
 - I do what I want, ask forgiveness, and deal with the consequences.
 - It's hard for me to live for what will count in the next life, so I just concentrate on this life.
 - I want to please God but know I will fail, so I often don't try.
 - I just do my best and hope it will all come out in the wash.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

Depending on how you live, you may consider this principle a promise, or you may consider it a threat. If your life is devoted to doing good, you can rest in God's promise to reward you with an inheritance. On the other hand, if you are doing things that could come back to haunt you, then change your attitude. Stop doing what you're doing. Today, you can begin to make things right. What you do will come back to you; so today, if you begin to do right, God can begin to bless you. Don't let fear hold you back. Instead of thinking of this principle as a threat, see it for what God intends it to be: a promise of a good life on earth and an even better life to come. God wants to fill your life with good things. Make it possible for him to do that. Make a commitment to do good in every area of your life.

Action Point: Which area of your life most needs change: your relationships, your work habits, or your spiritual life? Ask the group to pray for this area and to ask you in a month about any changes you have made.

—Study by Steve May, with JoHannah Reardon



Study Through the Bible

Colossians: Against the Tide - Study 9

Become a Prayer Warrior

We need to develop a solid foundation of prayer.

Paul challenged the Colossian Christians to do three things regarding prayer: Make prayer a priority, look for things to pray about, and pray with a good attitude. This study will challenge you to do each of these things. Before we can begin to think about what we want to accomplish for the Lord, we need to develop a solid foundation of prayer.

Scripture:

Colossians 4:2-6

Based on:

The "Against the Tide" sermon series by Steve May, PREACHING TODAY SERMONS



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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

When Jesus first introduced the idea of the church to his disciples, he said the gates of hell would not overcome it (Matthew 16:18). Most interpret this verse to mean that the church will be strong enough to endure the attacks of the devil. But an army doesn't bring its gates into battle with it. It leaves its gates at home. Jesus is saying that the church isn't supposed to be on the defensive in the spiritual battles of life; we are to be on the offensive. We are to attack. We are to storm the gates of hell.

As Paul finishes his letter to the Colossians, he extends a challenge to them and makes a special request. Read Colossians 4:2. We need believers committed to the ministry of prayer.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] Describe your most common prayers: Are they memorized, for yourself, for others, in praise to God? Do you have disciplined time or spontaneous prayer most often?

- [Q] Do you enjoy praying? Why or why not? If not, what might need to change for you to enjoy it?

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: Pray that you will have opportunities for ministry.

Read Colossians 4:2-6. God wants our involvement in the community and the world to be more than just opening our church doors to the public once or twice a week. He has called us not only to gather together for worship, but to reach out to others in ministry.

In every city there are places where the presence of Christ is desperately needed. In our schools are thousands of students who need to hear about the God who loves them and has big plans for their life. In all kinds of homes in all kinds of neighborhoods are families who need to hear about the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. Business professionals need to hear that Christ can fill their life with meaning. In the bars and clubs are people who need to know how Jesus can fill the emptiness that haunts them. People whose lives have been wrecked by sin need to know that God can put things back together for them. Those who are overcome with despair need to know there is hope in Christ. Thousands of people need to know there is a God who loves them so much he sent his only Son into the world to save them. And to communicate this message to the world, we must do more than open our doors once or twice a week. We need to go into the community and take the life-changing message of Jesus Christ with us.

Where do we go and when? That's what we need to pray about. Pray that God will open doors of ministry for you. We can't do everything that needs to be done, but we can go where God leads. When a door opens, we can go through that door. Pray that God will show you opportunities for ministry.



- [Q] What did Paul most want prayer for as he sat in prison (v. 3)? Do you think that would be foremost in your mind if you were unjustly imprisoned? What should that tell us about what our prayers should be like?
- [Q] Why does Paul advise us to be wise in the way we act toward outsiders (v. 5)? Where can we get that wisdom?
- [Q] How can you make sure your conversation is full of grace? What does it mean to have conversation that is seasoned with salt (v. 6)? Why is prayer necessary for both of these things?

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us discover the ministry God has for us.

Activity: Provide everyone paper and pen or pencil. Ask them to list all the things they most enjoy doing, or what they feel they are good at. After each item, tell them to list one way God might be able to use that activity for his glory. Discuss these as a group and spend some time praying that God would show you each what he wants you to do.

Teaching point two: Pray that you will proclaim the message of Christ.

Look again at verse 4. Paul said, “Pray that I may proclaim it clearly.”

One problem the church faces is that the world doesn’t know what our message is. Because of the way preachers and churches are portrayed on TV, the public has a misconception of what we are about. Maybe they think the heart of our message is, “Don’t do that.” That’s not the heart of our message at all—the gospel isn’t a set of do’s and don’ts. Maybe they think our message is, “To be a Christian you have to clean up your life and start doing good works, and if you become good enough, God will let you into heaven.” Maybe they think our message is, “All you have to do is join our church, and you are a Christian.”

The world doesn’t understand the gospel. It doesn’t make sense to them. Paul said that to some people it is a stumbling block and to others it is foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:23). People outside the church don’t understand the gospel. It is our responsibility to proclaim the gospel clearly, in a way they will understand.

What is the heart of our message? Jesus Christ is Lord and has the power to turn your life around. He can remove your guilt and shame, and replace it with joy and purpose.

As doors of opportunity open for us, we need to make sure that we proclaim our message clearly. We don’t want to be defined by what we are against; we want to be defined according to who we are for: the Lord Jesus Christ. Pray that we will proclaim this message faithfully to our world.

- [Q] What are some practical ways you can proclaim Christ to those around you?
- [Q] How can you know if a door of opportunity has been opened for you to share the gospel?
- [Q] Why must we pray for such opportunities? How do you think God feels about such a prayer?



[Q] Which of the following statements would be a good response to someone who asks, “What does a Christian believe will get them to heaven?”

- You should go to church every Sunday.
- You should always take Communion.
- You should live by the Ten Commandments.
- You should confess your sins and ask Christ to forgive you.
- You should be kind to those around you.

Teaching point three: Pray that we will not let setbacks stand in our way.

Look again at Colossians 4:3. Paul spent a significant part of his ministry behind bars, but he never stopped preaching, writing, or encouraging churches. In fact, prison was not the only setback Paul experienced. Read 2 Corinthians 11:24–28.

Wow! Can you imagine facing those kinds of setbacks and still pressing on? Paul refused to allow any obstacle to stand in his way. He simply would not give up.

It makes you feel wimpy, doesn't it? The fact is, we will experience setbacks in our efforts to do ministry. There will be times when it will become difficult and when quitting seems like the easiest (and the most logical) thing to do. No matter how attractive the option of giving up may seem, we must remain faithful. We must stay in the battle. We must continue to pursue the ministry to which God has called us.

David is a youth minister at a small church. His first year there he planned a special weeklong summer camp for his group. He rented a small retreat center and began encouraging the students in his group to come and bring their friends. More than 50 students came to Christ at that camp. During the next school year, David made plans for his next camp. That's when the problems began. He couldn't find a facility large enough for his group. Since the church owned only one bus, they would have to rent additional vehicles. The expenses mounted, requiring more fundraising activities. He needed adult sponsors and had trouble getting volunteers because there was an important church-wide event scheduled the same week as the camp. Finally, at a board meeting, he was told to cancel the trip. A board member said, “Obviously God is not in this project, or it wouldn't be so difficult.”

Where did this board member get his theology? It certainly wasn't from the Bible. The Bible is quite clear on this subject: if you seek to do any good thing for the glory of God, you will face opposition. You can't throw in the towel just because things get a little rough. David stood his ground, and the event finally came together. Again, more than 50 students gave their lives to Christ at this camp. David's youth group is now larger than the adult congregation of the church.

We cannot expect that life will always be easy. There will be obstacles. There will be setbacks. If we are to be the church God has called us to be, we must press on during hard times.



- [Q] Why do Christians often measure God's will by how easily things come together?
- [Q] What other passages or stories in Scripture support the fact that this just isn't true? Name as many as you can recall.
- [Q] Have you ever persevered in ministry when it looked impossible? If so, tell us about it.
- [Q] What part does prayer have in perseverance? Why?

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

We need a core of people committed to prayer. Make prayer a greater priority in your life. Pray that you will have an open door for ministry to your community, that you will proclaim clearly the message of Christ, and that you will carry on regardless of what stands in your way. With prayer and God's help, we cannot fail.

Action Point: Spend time praying through the principles discussed in this study.

—Study by Steve May, with JoHannah Reardon



