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主日证道 March 29, 2020

Colossians (4) Rooted and built up in Jesus Christ

Colossians: 2:6-23

Introduction

1. Peace be with you all. We are at a very special time in history. A few days ago, I saw an interesting post on the internet from a college teacher I know, with just two sentences: many years later, we can tell our grandchildren that we survived COVID-19 in 2020. This post is very impactful since on the one hand it acknowledged the severity of the pandemic, but on the other hand it expressed hope for the future .

2. This is also our family's prayer recently. Be cautious but not anxious. We remain alert on the outside environment, but we are calm and steady deep down. It's not easy, but we pray for Lord's mercy and grace so that we can gain strength in his precious Word and let the Word of God support us all.

3. we continue to study Colossians today. While I was meditating on today's sermon verses, I once wanted to preach another passage in responding to current situation. But in the end, I decided to follow the original plan for two reasons: first, today's scripture can be related to the situation we are facing now, as we will explain further later. Second, I have always believed that meditating and applying God's Word in an orderly and systemic manner is the only way to grow spiritually. Spiritual life is like the body's immune system. For the immune system to function properly, it's not depending on some strange or fast regimen, but a consistent healthy lifestyle. Similarly, verse by verse, passage by passage and book by book study and application of God's Word is the best way to build our spiritual immune system.

4. At the beginning, let us review the message of the last three sermons in Colossians. The first is regarding Paul's thanksgiving and prayer for the Colossian church in Col 1:1-14. The center of the whole prayer is 1:9 "asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding". It is God's will that Christ is preeminent, and this is the central message of Colossians. The second is Colossians 1:15-23, the main message is the supremacy of Christ. Christ is the firstborn of all creation, the head of the church, and my Savior. Last month, our third message preached on Colossians 1:24-2:5, Paul changed the subject, talking about his role as the Apostle of the gospel. Paul's self-proclaimed mission is not boasting, but serving three purposes; to preach the mystery of the gospel, to encourage the church, and to be cautious about plausible arguments.

5. Today we will continue from our last message, especially from "cautious about plausible arguments" into Colossians 2:6-23, which is also the core portion of the entire book. Paul knew that the Colossian church was facing some plausible philosophy and elemental spirits of the world, which had a great challenge to believers' faith, and it seemed that they would be taken away. Therefore, Paul especially points out the errors of these philosophy and remarks in order to correct people's hearts. As with the previous sermons, we are not examining it verse by verse but using the inductive way to compare the challenges faced by the Colossian church to a virus. First, we will make a diagnose, then look at Paul's prescription. Finally, we apply the principles in today's situation.

I. Diagnosis: Religious Syncretism

1. Three verses throughout the passage highlighted the challenges the church faces at the time, which are verses 8, 16 and 18.

V.8 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits^[a] of the world, and not according to Christ.

v.16 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

v.18 Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions,^[d] puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind,

2.The "philosophy" in verse 8 is a kind of ideology(thought system), which can also refer to either Greek philosophy or Judaism religious ideology. But the second half of Paul's explanation clarified the meaning of philosophy. Paul said such philosophy depends on human tradition and the elemental spirit of the world. In the New Testament, tradition usually refers to the Jewish tradition. The direct translation of elementary spirit of the world is the basic principles or elements of the world. It should be the term of Greek philosophy, referring to the four elements of fire, wind, earth and water. The ancient Greeks believed that these elements were divine. Verse 16 is more clear. food and drink, a festival, a new moon or a Sabbath are all customs related to Jewish tradition. Romans chapters 14-15 mentions the debate at that time between different groups of believers on whether to eat meat or not, which shows that this is not trivial.

The final verse 18 is a little hard to understand. What does the “asceticism and worship of angels” mean? It turned out that in the hundreds of years between the two testaments, which is from Malachi of the Old Testament to the beginning of the New Testament, a Trend of thought emerged among the Jews, that is to worship through worshipping angels. We only give an example to illustrate. Hebrews chapter 1, the author used the first three verses emphasizing the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He is the heir of all things, the exact imprint of his nature, and upholds the universe by the word of his power. The following verse of 1:4-14, the author spends a lot of passages comparing the Son of God and the angels, pointing out that the Son as the name he has inherited is more excellent than the angels. Angels are the ministering spirits and Son is the head of Salvation. Angels are created, and the Son is with the Father in eternity. Why

did the author of Hebrews talk about the Son above the angels in chapter one? Because worshipping angels was a very popular religious custom at that time. In the early church until the beginning of the fourth century, there was still heretics believed that Jesus was just the highest angel, Michael.

3.To sum up, the Colossian church faced a trend of thought that could be called "religious syncretism". This trend of thought combines Greek philosophy, Jewish tradition, and folk customs. And the most powerful thing about this religious syncretism is that it can mix elements of different religions and is inclusive of any religion. But in the process of blending different religions and thoughts, the uniqueness of Christianity was compromised and even sacrificed. Jesus Christ became a god, a powerful angel, not the only Savior; the salvation of Jesus Christ became an energy or a knowledge acquisition against the power of the spiritual realm. In the final analysis, religious syncretism is nothing more than a system that incorporates the terminology of Christianity, but it is a completely distorted Christian faith at its core.

II. Prescription: Christ is head of all, the source of fullness

1.Paul gave the prescription in the beginning.V2:6-7 ‘Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.’ The beginning and the end of Christianity have focused on one person, who is Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, the savior, and there is salvation in no one else. Paul reminded the church that, since we have believed in Jesus Christ, we should bear fruits in four aspects: walk in Him, rooted and built up in him, established in the faith, and abounding in thanksgiving.

There are two aspects that we need to pay attention: first, Paul was using present command, which means continually to grow in faith. Second, these four types of fruits echo the four phrases in 1:10 -12 (bearing fruit in every good work, increasing in the knowledge of God, endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father), and there are four aspects, which are to others, to yourself, outward, and upward. In other words, the result of believe in Christ is not

only having one more god to worship or another activity on Sunday morning, but change of the entire value system. Christianity will affect the way you look at those metaphysical things, such as how the world works and the law of the universe, and it will affect the way you treat yourself and others. We will focus on the ideology and religion regulation today, which is the aspects of to yourself and upward, and we will continue to focus on the aspect of our thinking, which is the aspect of to others and outward.

2. Jesus is the head of all and the source of fullness, and the believers should root and built up and established in the faith. This is a very broad general principle of faith. However, how can this affect the way that Colossian church solve the heresy they were facing specifically? Paul answered in two parts, the first is verse 8-12 and the second is verse 13-23. We will discuss them separately.

2.2:8 -12: What Paul answered first was the heresy stated in verse 8, and it belongs to the level of ideology. As we said before, the heresy included mixed Greek philosophy and Jewish tradition. Paul's response was against these two doctrines respectively.

- oGreek philosophy sees the universe as layers of spiritual power structure, from high to low, and Christ is one of them. In addition, Greek philosophy values spirituality more and contempt body, hence the incarnated Christ is a god in the lower level. To this ideology, Paul's response was that in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. The body of Christ do not limited God's nature, but God's fullness is showed in the incarnated Christ, and we have been brought to fullness in Christ and do not need to seek outward.

- oThe Jewish tradition values circumcision heavily, and think that it the main mark of God's people, and it could not be canceled even the Christ had come. Paul's response was that we have already been circumcised in Christ, and this circumcision is not done on the body, but on our hearts. The model of Christianity is not whether we have been circumcised bodily, but we died, buried, and raised with our Lord in baptism. The core event of Christianity is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not the laws of Moses.

4.2:13-23: Verses 8-12 are related to ideology, and the following verses 13-23 are related to the religion regulation. By the way, the thoughts of Paul are interlocking. When he finished saying that we will be free from all kind of religious regulation, he starts to discuss form of a holy life. Just as my teacher said, the freedom of Christian is not only liberated from death and sin, but also liberated for a holy and joyful living. Back to verse 13-23, Paul response to the heresy using 'Christ is the head of all and the source of fullness', and he applied this general principle of faith in the religion regulation specifically in this passage.

5. Brother and sisters, the two religious acts, 'body circumcision' and 'death and resurrection with the lord', are not only different on the surface, but also different greatly in their nature. 'body circumcision' represent the whole tradition of Moses' law, circumcision, sabbath day, and food restrictions etc, all within this tradition of law. After circumcision, you have to follow the rules of sabbath day, not eating the unclean food listed in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and all the regulation of the dress code, social life, and work, etc. If you must be circumcised bodily in order to become a Christian, the salvation of Jesus Christ become part of Jewish tradition, it is called "domesticated," which means compromised, new covenant becomes a chapter of Jewish tradition. However, Paul insisted that Christianity is to interpreted old testament using the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The circumcision in the old testament was pointed to Christ, and the old testament law, kings, priests, and prophets are all pointed to the new testament. The old testament is pointing to the new testament, and the new testament fulfill the old testament. The ultimate character in the salvation history is Jesus Christ, and he is the beginning and the end. Hence, the brothers and sisters in the Colossian church were set free from the regulation of the Moses' law. Diet, festivals, moon and sabbath may still be valuable to Jews and have their spiritual meaning, but the church could not ask all the believers to follow them strictly. From the verse 23 we can see that, if we turn our focus away from Christ to those regulation of 'do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!', it will only have two results, first, our faith become superficial, with only outside look but no real substance; second, faith will become a burden instead of good news.

III. Now: overcome anxiety, because the Lord is Lord

1. At the beginning of today's message, we mentioned that we are at a very special moment in history, referring to the severe pandemic situation, of course. Then we went back to the Colossian church two thousand years ago, thinking about the heretical challenges the church faced, and Paul's response. You may find that we did not discuss verses 16-23 in detail but briefly summarized them. The reason behind this is that I want to talk a little bit about the application at the end of the message. We need to apply inductive principles we learned to today's situation and let God's Word guide us.
2. I have summarized today's application into eight letters: "Overcome anxiety, since the Lord is Lord." If we are to choose an emotional word to describe people all over the world, I guess "anxiety" must be in the top three. People are watching the news at home every day, watching the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic, the more you watch, the more worried you become, the more worried you become and the more you will watch, becoming a vicious cycle. There is nothing wrong with watching the news, and it is even more necessary to be concerned about the pandemic, but to the point that if we are taken away by anxiety and worry, it is a great burden and even pitiful.
3. This pandemic is actually the best time for us to ponder who is the Lord of our lives. If the first century Colossian church was deeply victimized by "religious Syncretism " combining Greek philosophy and Jewish tradition, my reflection is, do we also suffer from another "religious Syncretism " today? Modern "religious Syncretism " combines our confidence in science and technology, our grasp of social progress, and our optimism of human civilization. Christianity was compromised in such "religious Syncretism ", as if only my "church life" needs Christ, but my job, family, and private life do not need Him. This pandemic broke our external safeguards one by one, forcing us to examine what we really rely on in our lives.
4. A Christian can overcome anxiety not because he is naive and thinks that the boat is straight to the bridgehead; nor is it because he blindfolds himself and does not look at what is

happening outside, self-deceived. No, a Christian can overcome anxiety because he knows that Christ is Lord. Knowing that he is in Christ, he was able to bear four fruits: walk in Him, rooted and built up in him, established in the faith, and abounding in thanksgiving. Not one difficulty is greater than Christ, and no disease can separate us from the love of Christ. Overcome anxiety because the Lord is Lord. He is always Lord. May we be freed and strengthened in this truth. Let's pray together.