

Paul's Prison Epistles

Lesson 2

Paul and the Colossians

Lesson Guide



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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Preparation

- Read the book of Colossians.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

II. Background (2:08)

A. Relationships (3:27)

1. Church (3:51)

Paul had never actually visited the church in Colossae but cared deeply for them (Colossians 2:1).

Paul had an indirect relationship with the Colossians through representatives such as:

- Epaphras
- Philemon
- Onesimus
- Tychicus

Paul regularly prayed for the Colossians, asking for the blessings he knew would most benefit them (Colossians 1:9).

Colossian church sent messengers to Paul and both Epaphras and Onesimus visited Paul while he was imprisoned.

2. Individuals (8:20)

Paul had personal friends from Colossae, many of whom had labored alongside (Philemon 1-2):

- Philemon
- Apphia
- Archippus
- Epaphras — Paul's fellow worker and fellow prisoner, a faithful minister of Christ
- Onesimus — Slave who sought out Paul after fleeing from Philemon; ministered to Paul in prison.

B. Problems in Colossae (10:53)

Epaphras told Paul about false teaching that was threatening the church in Colossae which prompted Paul to write his letter to the Colossians.

1. **Greek Philosophy (11:36)**

True mystery, wisdom and knowledge were found only in Christ, and not in pagan religions (Colossians 2:1-4, NIV).

Paul explicitly identified pagan philosophy as his target and condemned it (Colossians 2:8).

“Philosophy,” according to the Greek usage here, refers to religious speculations based on traditions.

False teachers in Colossae were enamored with beliefs and practices like those found in Greek religion and occult mysticism.

Asceticism — An improper avoidance of physical pleasure; often rooted in the mistaken idea that pleasure is immoral.

Paul denounced these ascetic practices in Colossae (Colossians 2:20-23):

- based on the “elemental spirits” or basic principals of the world, i.e., spiritual beings and angelic powers
- no value for resisting sin; therefore provides no benefits

2. **Jewish Law (18:03)**

Paul upheld the law of Moses and was willing to participate in many traditional Jewish practices for the sake of the gospel.

Paul’s criticisms indicate that the false teachers were using Jewish teachings and practices in corrupt ways (Colossians 2:16).

Their practices distorted Old Testament law and endangered the eternal destinies of those who followed them (Colossians 2:17-18).

The false teachers, however, had corrupted these laws by mixing them with idolatrous worship and pagan asceticism.

Paul refuted the false teachers by teaching the Colossians that because of their baptisms, they did not need to be circumcised (Colossians 2:11-12).

3. **Spiritual Beings (23:03)**

The Colossian church was courting the worship of spiritual beings.

- **Angels (23:27)**

Angels serve God by engaging in spiritual warfare, influencing national politics, delivering messages to his people, caring for the earthly needs of believers (Hebrews 1:14).

Paul condemned the teaching that angels were cosmic powers that revealed mysteries to those who would perform cultic rites and worship them (Colossians 2:18).

The exaggerated view the false teachers had of the power and influence of angels was not uncommon in the ancient world.

- **Rulers and Authorities (27:03)**

“Rulers” and “authorities” — spiritual beings such as angels.

Paul emphasized Christ’s superiority over every power and authority in heaven and on earth (Colossians 1:16).

- “thrones” – *thronos* (θρόνος)
- “dominions” – *kuriotēs* (κυριότης).
- “rulers” – *archē* (ἀρχή)
- “authorities” – *exousia* (ἐξουσία)

The false teachers attributed to these invisible rulers actions and abilities that belong to Christ alone (Colossians 1:16).

The real contrast was not the spiritual over the earthly, but Christ over all.

Only evil spirits allow themselves to be worshiped and Christ does not permit the worship of his enemies. (Colossians 2:15).

- **Basic Principles (32:24)**

Stoicheia (στοιχεῖα) — “basic principles,” or gods and spiritual powers associated with stars and planets or the four basic elements (earth, wind, fire, water)

Paul referred to the basic principles when he warned the Galatians not to turn back to “those who by nature are not gods” (Galatians 4:8-9).

These basic principles were the basis for the philosophy of the false teachers (Colossians 2:8).

The false teachers mixed Jewish legalism, pagan religion and Christianity encouraging the worship of the basic principles.

III. Structure and Content (35:13)

A. Salutation, 1:1-2 (36:11)

Identifies the apostle Paul as the authoritative author of this letter, and mentions that the letter also comes from Paul’s disciple Timothy.

B. Encouragements, 1:3-14 (37:15)

Paul thanked God for their faith and salvation and prayed that the Lord would bless them with spiritual discernment and strength to do good works.

C. Final Greetings, 4:7-18 (38:02)

Paul sent greetings to the Colossians from the many people who were with him in prison.

Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon were written and delivered at approximately the same time.

Paul wrote these letters to specific people in particular circumstances, but he intended them to be applicable to different audiences.

D. Supremacy of Christianity, 1:15–4:6 (40:18)

The main body of the letter details the supremacy of Christianity over the religion of the false teachers.

1. Supremacy of Christ, 1:15-20 (40:42)

- **Image of God, 1:15 (43:01)**

Paul described Christ as the image of the invisible God, a stark contrast to the spiritual powers extolled by the false teachers (Colossians 1:15, 16).

In some Greek philosophies, the universe was thought to be God's image, the greatest revelation of God.

Paul called Christ the “image of God” to show that Christ was the ultimate revelation of God.

- **Firstborn of all Creation, 1:15 (45:03)**

Paul called Christ the firstborn of all creation — *prōtotokos* (πρωτότοκος) referring to superiority and authority rather than to order of birth (Colossians 1:15, 16).

Some cults falsely believe this term indicates that Christ was “born” and is not equal to God the Father.

Paul associated Christ's status as "firstborn" with his authority and supremacy over all creation and said nothing about a time when Jesus did not exist.

- **Agent of Creation, 1:16 (47:44)**

Christ is the "agent of creation" or the one through whom God created the universe.

Jewish mysticism attributed creation to the angels; Greek philosophers attributed it to the elements or astral powers.

Christ was the only agent of creation; other powers were inferior to him and subject to him (Colossians 1:16).

Christ's priority as the agent of creation makes him far superior to everything within creation.

- **Supreme Lord, 1:18 (49:13)**

Christ is the supreme Lord because God placed him as head over the church.

He is also “head of the body, the church” and the “firstborn from among the dead” — Lord over the new humanity.

Any system that seeks to supplant or qualify Christ’s unique sovereignty must be false.

- **God Incarnate, 1:19 (50:24)**

Although Christ is incarnate “all the fullness of God” dwells in him, making Christ the incarnation of the supreme God.

- **Only Reconciler, 1:20 (51:43)**

Christ is the only reconciler between God and the fallen, sinful world).

Jesus Christ is the one who brings peace between God and his fallen creation “by the blood of his cross.”

For the Colossians to submit to these teaching was to diminish, even steal, the glory and authority that belonged only to Christ.

Through Jesus alone, sins could be forgiven and God's favor gained.

2. **Supremacy of Christ's Ministers, 1:21–2:5 (54:48)**

- **Reconciliation, 1:21-23; 2:5 (56:11)**

Paul and the Colossians had already experienced reconciliation through the gospel.

False teachers encouraged people to placate demons but their so-called gospel had no power to save.

Colossian believers experienced the true reconciliation that comes through the true gospel.

- **Altruism, 1:24 (57:48)**

Paul spoke of his suffering on behalf of the church.

- **Commission, 1:25 (58:40)**

Paul had been appointed to his apostleship by God himself.

Jesus gave Paul authority to speak on his behalf, making Paul's authority far superior to that of the false teachers.

- **Revelation, 1:25-28; 2:2-4 (1:00:23)**

The revelation Paul received was superior to that attested by the false teachers (2:4).

Paul spent three years in the desert of Arabia and Damascus receiving revelations from God (Galatians 1:15-18).

- **Empowerment, 1:29-2:1 (1:02:14)**

The empowerment of Christ's ministers is superior because *God* gave power to his ministers.

The Holy Spirit gifted Paul with astounding gifts to advance the kingdom of God on earth (1:29).

3. **Supremacy of Salvation in Christ, 2:6-23 (1:03:40)**

- **Life in Christ, 2:6-15 (1:03:55)**

Paul described benefits of salvation that come through union with Christ:

- *Lordship of Christ, 2:6-10*

Because Christ is our Lord we are rooted, built up and strengthened in him.

Those under Christ's Lordship were given authority to rule with him.

- *Spiritual Vitality, 2:11-13*

We have spiritual vitality because we are in union with Christ.

We participate in Christ's death, resulting in forgiveness, and his resurrection and life, resulting in the rebirth of our spirits.

- *Forgiveness, 2:13-15*

As believers united to Christ, we have forgiveness from sin and are freed from attempting to earn our own salvation

Because we are united to Christ in his death, we have already died the death that the law requires.

- **Life Under Elements, 2:16-23 (1:07:57)**

Paul condemned life lived under subjection to the demonic elements.

Anyone who turns from Christ to the demonic elements suffers separation from Christ and spiritual weakness.

Union with Christ frees believers from the Law's condemnation but turning to demonic elements leads to the deceitfulness of asceticism.

The salvation offered in Christ is far better than the blessings purported by the false teachers in Colossae.

4. Supremacy of Christian Living, 3:1–4:6 (1:10:27)

Paul taught that we are to value the spiritual and heavenly things more highly than the earthly things (3:2).

Paul agreed with the ascetic teachers that fleshly indulgence is evil but disagreed with them as to how to avoid such sin (3:5).

The ascetics claimed to point to the spiritual realm, but their teachings focused on mundane, earthly matters.

Paul's key to ethical living: Believers are united to Christ, therefore we are to be "renewed" by putting off the "old self" and putting on the "new self."

Believers succeed in ethical living by emphasizing heavenly, spiritual virtues rather than rigorous self-denial of asceticism.

Paul's approach is effective because it focuses

- on reliance on God's power rather than on our own
- away from mere earthly matters, and onto positive virtues that come from the Spirit of God

IV. Modern Application (1:18:30)

A. Loyal to Christ (1:18:50)

In the first century Roman Empire, polytheism (or belief in multiple gods and spiritual powers) was the dominant religious idea.

The Roman Empire persecuted Christians largely because the Christians refused to acknowledge and to worship the gods of the civic cult.

Christ demands exclusive worship — if we worship Christ, we cannot worship anything else (1:22-23).

If we do not remain faithful to Christ, then we prove that we have not been truly reconciled to God.

Our modern world frequently challenges our loyalty to Christ:

- polytheism (Taoism, Hinduism, Shinto)
- general “spirituality” (Satanism, witchcraft, etc.)
- atheism (abandoning all belief in God and Christ)
- philosophical relativism (insistence on religious tolerance)

B. Spiritual Focus (1:25:38)

When we come to faith in Christ, our spirits are renewed within us by the work of God's Spirit.

Our salvation does not depend on our earthly pursuits, but on the spiritual realities of our renewed spirits and our union with Christ.

- “unregenerate” – those who have not come to faith and are spiritually dead
- “regenerate” – those who have faith and are spiritually alive

Regeneration makes us new people — we are not just forgiven; we are also transformed (Colossians 2:13).

Once God made us alive, we have the ability to desire good and to do good.

Our spirits have been made new; now we are spiritual people — the most beneficial thing for us to do is to focus on our spiritual lives (3:1-2).

Some Christians have mistakenly thought that when Paul said that we are to focus on heavenly things and not on earthly things, he meant that we should withdraw from the normal human life

If we focus all of our energies on suppressing our sinful desires, we are still focusing on sinful desires.

To be heavenly minded is to focus on Christ, that we may receive his blessings and be empowered to be more like him while we are here on earth (3:12-16).

Paul's moral instructions pertain to spiritual or heavenly matters. Yet, they can only be carried out through active involvement in the present world.

V. Conclusion (1:37:10)

7. What makes Christian living superior to other approaches to morality?

8. Summarize the structure and content of Colossians.

9. Why is it important to remain loyal to Christ?

10. Why is it important to have a spiritual focus?

Application Questions

1. The negative influence of the false teachers made it difficult for the Colossian believers to discern truth from error. What influences in your own culture make it hard to discern truth from error? How can Paul's focus on the supremacy of Christianity guide our own strategy in dealing with error?
2. How should understanding that Christ is the supreme agent of creation shape your approach to the world's challenges and opportunities?
3. How has Christ reconciled you to God? What areas of your world or relationships would be different if Christ's reconciling work were brought to completion?
4. Paul prayed for the Colossians. What benefits might there be to following his example?
5. How does union with Christ help Christians live ethically? Why should this strategy be more effective than the ethical strategies of the ascetics? How does asceticism contrast with appropriate uses of the Christian disciplines?
6. In what areas of life are you challenged in your loyalty to Christ?
7. How should the truth of regeneration shape our view of ourselves and of others? How does regeneration makes us new people?
8. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study?

Glossary

altruism – Selfless concern or suffering to benefit others

angels – Intelligent, rational spirits with wills and personalities that are loyal to God and minister to man on God's behalf

apostle – Special New Testament office held by someone who had been taught by Jesus, had seen the risen Lord, and had been chosen for the office by the Lord himself; from a Greek word meaning "one who is sent"

Apphia – Woman from Colossae that Paul affectionately called "our sister"; most likely a member of Philemon's household, probably his wife

archē – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "beginning" or "origin"; sometimes translated "rulers" or "principalities" in reference to invisible powers like angels or demons

Archippus – "Fellow soldier" of Paul in the ministry; possibly the host of the church in Colossae and/or a member of Philemon's household

asceticism – The improper avoidance of physical pleasure

atheism – Belief that there is no God

circumcision – The Jewish tradition of excising the foreskin of the male penis instituted by God as a sign and seal for his covenant people in Genesis 17:10-14

Colossae – Relatively small city in the ancient Roman province of Asia Minor in a region called Phrygia in the Lycus Valley; home of Philemon and Onesimus

Dead Sea Scrolls – Collection of ancient scrolls, first discovered in caves at Qumran in 1947, that includes Old Testament texts and extra-biblical writings documenting the distinct teachings of an ancient Jewish community

Epaphras – Fellow laborer with the apostle Paul and founder of the church in Colossae who was sent by the churches of the Lycus Valley to minister to Paul in prison

exousia – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "power" or "authority"; often refers to invisible spiritual powers such as angels or demons

Gnosticism – Early heresy from the first centuries after Christ; believed that material things were evil, including the human body; therefore, God would never take on the form of human flesh, so Jesus was not both God and man

gospel – Literally, "good news"; announcement that God's kingdom came to earth through the person and work of Jesus and that it expands toward its great consummation as God grants salvation to those who receive and trust in Jesus as the Messiah

incarnation – Term that refers to Jesus' permanent assumption of a human nature

kuriotēs – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "dominion" or "one who possesses dominion"; usually refers to human kings but can refer to spiritual beings

Laodicea – City in Asia Minor; in the book of Revelation, Jesus accused the church here of being "neither hot nor cold"

Lycus Valley – An area defined by the Lycus River in the ancient Roman province of Asia Minor where Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea were located

Mosaic law – Also called the law of Moses; can refer to the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah or Pentateuch, or the statutes, ordinances and judgments revealed by God to the ancient Israelites through Moses

occult – Term referring to matters involving supernatural, magical or mysterious powers or knowledge, like witchcraft or astrology

Onesimus – Philemon's run-away slave from Colossae who appealed to the apostle Paul while Paul was in prison and who became very dear to Paul

Philemon – One of Paul's close friends from Colossae who labored alongside Paul in gospel ministry; master of the run-away slave Onesimus

Phrygia – Name of an ancient region in the central part of Asia Minor where Paul established and later visited several churches during his missionary journeys

Plato – (ca. 427-347 B.C.) Ancient Greek philosopher who studied under Socrates and founded the Academy at Athens

polytheism – Belief in multiple gods

prōtotokos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “first born”; often refers to superiority or authority rather than birth order

regenerate – Term used in theology to mean reborn, recreated, spiritually alive

regeneration – Recreation; rebirth; in theology, the event in which a human being moves from a state of spiritual death into a state of spiritual life

relativism – A philosophical view that treats moral judgments as a matter of personal opinion relative to the changing norms of one's culture, society or historical context without adhering to an absolute standard of right and wrong

stoicheia – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “basic principles”; commonly used to refer to gods and spiritual powers associated with stars and planets; can also refer to the four basic physical elements of earth, wind, fire and water

thronos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “throne”; usually refers to the seat of human kings but can refer to spiritual beings

Tychicus – One of Paul's close friends from Asia Minor who accompanied Paul during part of his missionary journeys and who brought messages to and from Paul during Paul's imprisonment

unregenerate – Term used in theology to mean not reborn, not recreated, spiritually dead