The Supremacy of Christ: A Study of Colossians

by

The Rev. Dave Johnson and
The Rev. Dr. Justin S. Holcomb

Christ Episcopal Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

www.christchurcheville.org
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The purpose of this study is to investigate the apostle Paul’s letter to the Colossians chapter by chapter. The focus of this letter is Jesus—who he is and what he did.

Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians to declare the supremacy of Jesus Christ. This epistle was to dispel false religious teachings that had confused and misled many of the believers there.

Session 1—Overview of Colossians and the Supremacy of Jesus
Session 2—Jesus and His Word of Truth, the Gospel (chapter 1)
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“I am a historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that the penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history.”
—H. G. Wells.
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Session 1—Overview of Colossians and the Supremacy of Jesus

Jesus and False Religious Beliefs
Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians to declare in extremely positive terms the supremacy of Jesus Christ. Paul's letter to the church at Colosse was to dispel false religious teachings that had confused and misled many of the believers there. The letter suggests that some form of Jewish mysticism that believed in secret religious knowledge and worshipped angels was being disbursed among the Colossians. In response to these heretical teachings, Paul emphasizes the difference between Christ and the other significant messengers of God and the difference between God’s “word of truth, the gospel” and the mystical idea of secret knowledge.

Outline of Colossians
I. Introduction and the Word of Truth (Col 1:1-14)
II. Supremacy of Christ (Col 1:15-23)
III. Paul’s Labors (Col 1:24-2:7)
IV. Human Regulations and False Piety (Col 2:8-23)
V. New Life (Col 3:1-4:1)
VI. Evangelism and Relations in the Church (Col 4:2-18)

Dates & Location
The most likely imprisonment that Paul refers to in this letter is his Roman custody, which dates the letter's composition around 60 AD, the period in which he also penned Ephesians and Philemon. Paul's house arrest in Rome is chronicled in Acts 28:14-31, and this seems to be the circumstances in which the letter to the Ephesians was written. Colosse was a dying city. Several hundred years before, it had been a thriving metropolis, but the booming neighboring cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis diminished its economic importance. The church at Colosse was founded by Epaphras, a convert of Paul's. Perhaps it was the fact that this church was started by a young Christian rather than Paul himself that made is especially vulnerable to false teachings like the one Paul is thwarting.

Main Themes in Colossians

The Supremacy of Christ (1:15-20): Probably in response to heretical teachings concerning angel worship or the exaltation of the Old Testament mediators, Paul emphasizes the qualitative difference between the Christ and the other significant messengers of God.

Wisdom (2:1-8): The false teachers were claiming some kind of secret knowledge of God, a knowledge that Paul speaks against. The simple beauty of the gospel is not something reserved for profound thinkers, but is for all people. It is not something to be hoarded in secret, but proclaimed.

Regulations (2:20-23): Part of the false teachers' doctrine included many strict rules and regulations about what must or must not be handled, eaten, or engaged in. Paul dismisses such false piety as an offense to Christ, who fulfilled the law in our stead and offers instead the Spirit to show us divine love, and lead us into spiritual maturity. Rules have no power to curb the sinful nature, but the knowledge and experience of God do.
The Supremacy of Jesus

The movie “Dogma” opens on the steps of a NJ church, where Cardinal Glick is holding a press conference to announce the launch of a new campaign (“Catholicism Wow!”), which he hopes will reverse the decline in church attendance. At the press conference he says this: “While it has been a time-honored and traditional symbol of our faith, we have decided to retire the highly recognizable, yet wholly depressing symbol of our Lord crucified. Why? Well, look at it. Would you relish being a member of a group that uses a man nailed to two pieces of wood as its masthead? Of course not - who would? I've got enough downers in my day without having to deal with this visual every time I go to worship. Instead, the church is going to adopt this new, more soothing and inspiring image, a morale booster that we feel is in-line with our new outlook. I give you the Buddy Christ.” The cardinal pulls a cover off an object to his right to unveil a figure of a smiling, winking savior giving an affirming thumbs-up.

It seems that everyone has an opinion of Jesus. The following quotes, complied by Mark Driscoll, are a smattering of what great figures in human history have said about Jesus:

- Mahatma Gandhi: “I cannot say that Jesus was uniquely divine. He was as much God as Krishna, or Rama, or Mohammed, or Zoroaster.”
- Adolf Hitler: “In boundless love as a Christian and as a man I read through the passage which tells us how the Lord at last rose in His might and seized the scourge to drive out of the Temple the brood of vipers and adders. How terrific was His fight for the world against the Jewish poison.”
- Larry King was asked who he would most want to interview if he could choose anyone from all of history. He said, “Jesus Christ.” The questioner said, “And what would you like to ask Him?” King replied, “I would like to ask Him if He was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me.”
- John Lennon: “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue with that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first, rock and roll or Christianity.”
Friedrich Nietzsche: “Jesus died too soon. If he had lived to my age he would have repudiated his doctrine.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “Socrates died like a philosopher; Jesus Christ died like a God.”

Mark Twain: “If Christ were here now there is one thing he would not be a Christian.”

Oprah Winfrey: “There couldn't possibly be just one way.” [Lady in the audience: “What about Jesus?”] “What about Jesus? Does God care about your heart or does God care about if you call his son Jesus?”

Malcolm X: “All white people who have studied history and geography know that Christ was a black man. Only the poor, brainwashed American Negro has been made to believe that Christ was white, to maneuver him into worshiping the white man.”

People tell us all sorts of things about Jesus. He was rich. He was poor. He was black. He was white. He was God and not God. He was a liar who told the truth, born of a virgin who was a tramp. He rose from the dead or else escaped death to shack up with His girlfriend.

But what do we know about Jesus—who he is and what he did? According to the New Testament, Jesus’ life was very simple, which is very curious because we are still talking about him today. He lived about 2,000 years ago and was born to a teenaged woman named Mary who was a virgin. He was born into poverty, into very humble circumstance. He was adopted by Joseph, a simple carpenter, and spent the first thirty years of His life in obscurity, swinging a hammer with His dad.

The first 30 years of his life were fairly pretty normal. He learned, went to synagogue, was a kid doing whatever kids in that day did, and worked a job as a carpenter. But around the age of thirty, Jesus began a public ministry that included preaching, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and befriending people who were marginalized because they were perverts, lepers, drunks, and thieves. Jesus’ ministry spanned only three short years before He was put to death for declaring Himself to be God. He died by shameful crucifixion like tens of thousands of people had before Him.

Ever since his crucifixion and resurrection, human history has been changed. This is why H. G. Wells said: “I am a historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history.” Jesus is the most towering figure in human history. Billions of people worship him today as God. In his wake is the largest religion in the history of the world. There are more songs about him, more paintings of him, and more books about him than anyone else ever.

Jesus is the most significant and most important person of human history. How do we go from the simplicity of his life and the amazing effects of his legacy? The book of Colossians will answer this question.

**Conclusion**  
Charles Spurgeon beautifully articulated the reality of Christ’s exaltation: “Look at him! Can your imagination picture him? Behold his transcendent glory! The majesty of kings is swallowed
up; the pomp of empires dissolves like the white mist of the morning before the sun; the brightness of assembled armies is eclipsed. He in himself is brighter than the sun, more terrible than armies with banners. See him! See him! O! Hide your heads, you kings; put away your gaudy pageantry, you lords of this poor narrow earth! His kingdom knows no bounds; without a limit his vast empire stretches out itself. Above him all is his; beneath him many a step are angels, and they are his; and they cast their crowns before his feet. With them stand his elect and ransomed, and their crowns too are his.”
Greetings: Grace, Peace, and the Will of God (verses 1-2)

In the first two verses of Colossians, Paul begins as he begins each of his thirteen letters in the New Testament: he identifies himself and proclaims the grace of God to his recipients. Specifically, Paul identifies himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” The powerful conversion of Paul is found in Acts 9, which records how Paul, a legalistic Pharisee and blasphemous persecutor of the Christian Church, encounters the risen Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. Jesus appoints Paul to be an apostle and Paul spends the rest of his life preaching the gospel and planting churches in various locations throughout the Roman Empire. It is important to note that Paul does not identify himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ by his own choosing, but rather “by the will of God.” This reflects the truth that God chooses us; we do not choose him. As Jesus told his disciples at the Last Supper, “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16). Although an apostle “by the will of God,” Paul is fully aware of the fact that he is a sinner saved by grace: “[even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence]… I received mercy… and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me” (I Timothy 1:13-14). Paul also acknowledges that his letter is from Timothy as well. Timothy was one of Paul’s missionary companions and eventually became a bishop at Ephesus to whom Paul wrote two letters (I and II Timothy) encouraging him in his gospel ministry.

Paul proclaims the grace and peace of God to the Christians at Colossae: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father” (vs. 2). The ultimate expression of grace, God’s unmerited and one-way love toward us, comes in the person of Jesus Christ (“The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”—John 1:17), who died on the cross for the sins of the world and was raised from the dead (“Jesus… was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification”—Romans 4:25). It is through the grace of God that we are saved: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). We also experience peace, a reconciled relationship with God, through the Person of Jesus Christ (“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”—Romans 5:1; see also Colossians 1:20), who is the Prince of Peace (see Isaiah 9:6).

Please read Colossians 1 and discuss these questions:

1. Verse 5 is about faith, hope, and love. Discuss how these are gifts from God. What comfort is there in faith, hope, and love being gifts from God?
2. Verses 3-14 reveals Paul’s prayer for the Colossians. What types of things does he pray for the Colossians? Which of these stand out as what you would like God to do in your life?
3. What does 15-23 tell us about a) who Jesus is and b) what has he done? Regarding what Christ has done, Paul uses the word “reconcile” twice (verses 20 and 22). Why does he use this term?
4. Why do you think Paul talks about his suffering for the gospel? What encouragement can you find in verses 24-29?
Faith, Hope, and Love (verse 5)

In several of Paul’s letters he communicates that he often prays for his recipients (see Romans 1:9-10; Ephesians 1:16-17; and Philippians 1:3-4) and he does so here in 1:3 (“in our prayers for you we always thank God”) and again in 1:10 (“we have not ceased praying for you”). Paul then speaks of the faith, love, and hope of the Colossian Christians: “we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” (1:4-5). Faith, love, and hope are three key gifts that God gives us in Jesus Christ (see Romans 12:3 for faith; I John 3:1 and 4:10 for love; and Romans 5:2-5 for hope). Paul also writes of faith, love and hope together in I Corinthians 13:14 (“faith, hope, and love abide”) and I Thessalonians 1:3 (“remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope”). The faith, love, and hope we are given through Christ are fruit of the Holy Spirit bears in our lives after we hear the gospel and receive Jesus Christ and they are connected to our “truly comprehending the grace of God” (1:6). Paul also mentions how Epaphras (“our beloved fellow servant”) communicated to him the love the Colossians experienced by the Holy Spirit (1:7-8). Paul also refers to Epaphras in his Letter to Philemon (23).

Faith is a gift of God. Hebrews 11 (the faith chapter) says faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. The chapter describes a list of people and how they had faith in God and God’s actions on their behalf. That’s what faith is—trust in God and what has done for you in Jesus. Faith isn’t digging down deep in ourselves or some leap you need to make ever once in a while. Through faith we trust in Christ. When we trust in Christ we experience grace, reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins. Romans 5:1-2—Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. So, when you stop and think about your relationship with God and the reality of your sinfulness hits you and you realize that you are not good enough, be comforted that it only takes faith in Christ—not you being good enough or getting yourself together—to reconcile you to God.

Like faith, Love is a gift of God. Love was our problem. That sounds weird, huh? Jesus summarizes the commands of God under to commands: #1—love God and #2—love your neighbor. But this is bad news for us because we stubbornly rebel against God and love ourselves way more than we love others. But, God loved us in Jesus. Romans 5:6-8—“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” That good news—that God loves us—causes us to love God and others (even our enemies). We love God and others because God first loved us through Christ. God’s love for us produces love for God and others. I John 4:9-10—“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

Like faith and love, hope is a gift of God. We can have hope because of what Jesus did. We can have hope for the future because of Jesus’ resurrection. “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). We can carry through the difficulties of this life because we know God is good and he is not playing games with our life and he had a plan for us.

Heidelberg catechism asks, What is your only hope in life and death? The answer it gives is: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and
delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

**Paul’s Prayer for the Colossians (verses 3-14)**

Paul communicates that he was praying that the Colossian Christians would “be filled with the knowledge of God’s will” and “lead lives worthy of the Lord,” which involves God bearing fruit in their lives, helping them “grow in the knowledge of God,” and making them “strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power” so that they will be “prepared to endure everything with patience” (1:9-11). It is important to notice that in all these things God is the giver and we are the recipients. Our response in found in 1:12—to give thanks joyfully to God, because through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13). As fallen sinners we were helpless under the power of darkness, and in our helplessness God sent Jesus Christ to rescue us and redeem us, or buy us back, through his shed blood on the cross. In Paul’s day when slaves were redeemed, it meant their freedom had been paid in full and they were freed from their former master. Through Jesus Christ God set us free from sin, death and the power of darkness through Jesus Christ (“in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”—1:14), and set us free to serve God, “whose service is perfect freedom” (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 57).

**The Supremacy of Christ (verses 15-23)**

In this section, Paul makes it clear that Jesus Christ is supreme because he is fully divine. Jesus Christ is described here as the image of “the invisible God,” the creator and sustainer of the universe, the head of the church, and the “firstborn from the dead” (1:15-18). Jesus Christ is supreme over all (he has “first place in everything”—1:18) because of who he is, the fully divine Son of God, and what he did in saving the world through his death and resurrection. Paul summarizes this brilliantly: “For in him (Jesus) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (1:19-20).

Every Sunday, many Christians recite the Nicene Creed, which emerged in the fourth century, to emphasize the full divinity of Jesus Christ as Paul does in this section of Colossians. “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made” (BCP 358). It is Jesus’ identity as the fully divine Son of God that makes his death on the cross efficacious to atone for the sins of the world, that makes him, as John the Baptist said, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Paul further emphasizes that through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross we have been reconciled to God so that we are “holy and blameless and irreproachable before him” (1:22). Elsewhere Paul describes how Jesus reconciled us to God while we were still sinners and enemies of God (Romans 5:1-11) and how because we have been reconciled to God, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:18-19). When we reconcile our checkbooks, we make sure they reflect the truth of the bank statement and that things are the way they’re supposed to be. When we are reconciled with God through Jesus Christ, we are imputed
with the righteousness of God and therefore made “holy and blameless and irreproachable before
him.” That gives us a relationship with God that we were created to have in the first place and
does that make all things the way they’re supposed to be. All of this gives us faith and hope so
that we can “continue securely established and steadfast in the faith” (1:23).

Paul’s Labors (verses 24-29)

Paul describes himself as a “servant of this gospel” (1:23b) and his labor in preaching the
gospel and planting churches throughout the Roman Empire involved much suffering. Rather
than avoiding or complaining about his suffering, he rejoices in them (verse 24). In his letter to
the Philippians, Paul refers to suffering for the gospel as a “privilege” (1:29) and in 2 Corinthians
he summarizes his sufferings for the gospel:

“Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was
beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night
and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from
bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in
the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters, in toil and hardship,
through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked”
(11:25-27).

Paul rejoiced in these sufferings not because he was sadistic, but because he knew what an
amazing privilege he had been given as an apostle of Jesus Christ commissioned “to make the
word of God fully known”—in other words, to preach the gospel, that Jesus Christ, the Son of
God, died on the cross for the sins of the world and was raised again so that we may have
forgiveness of sins and therefore an eternal relationship with God. Moreover, because Jesus had
suffered for Paul’s sake, Paul was more than willing to suffer for the church, the “body” of
Christ (1:24).

The gospel not only contains good news for the present (God loves us and forgives us
through Jesus Christ), but also hope for the future (we have the hope of eternal life because Jesus
Christ is risen). As Christians our hope is not based on a future event or change in circumstances,
but in a Person, Jesus Christ: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (vs. 27). That is why when Paul
preached, he preached Jesus Christ—“it is he whom we proclaim” (vs. 28). We also see this
Christ-centered preaching emphasized in 1 Corinthians: “we proclaim Christ crucified” (1:23).
Moreover, Paul gave everything he had and labored by the power of the Holy Spirit (“for this I
toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me”—vs. 29) to preach
this gospel everywhere he went, with the goal of presenting “everyone mature in Christ” (vs. 28).
And we can trust that we too will eventually be presented “mature in Christ,” because “the one
(God) who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ”
(see Philippians 1:6). In other words, God always finishes what he starts.
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Session 3—Jesus and His Freedom from Human Regulations and Religion (chapter 2)

Introduction

In chapter 1, Paul has reminded his readers of the essential ingredients of the gospel (1:12-23) they first heard from Epaphras (1:6-7), and has defended his authority to admonish and teach his readers in its light (1:24-2:3). Having laid this foundation, he is now ready to attend to the issue that is the purpose for this letter—the Christ-less theology that threatens the faith of the Colossian believers.

In Paul's response to false teachings, he usually identifies the theological errors present in a particular congregation and draws out their negative implications for faith and life. For Paul, the problem with bad theology is that it results in distorted notions of Christ and what it means to follow him. He clarifies a problem by looking at its spiritual and moral consequences.

Following this pattern, Colossians contains two sharp discussions. The first discussion is theological (2:4-23, which is the focus of this session): Paul challenges the theological convictions that underlie the competing understanding of Christian faith in Colosse. The second discussion is mainly ethical (3:1-4:1, which the focus of session 4): Paul describes the character of Christian life that is imperiled by the false teaching.

Please read Colossians 2 and discuss these questions:

1. What is Paul’s purpose for the letter to the Colossians according to verses 2-4?
2. Discuss how verses 9 and 10 describe Jesus. What is he significance of these descriptions?
3. What did God do for you in Christ according to verses 13-15? How is this Good News for you?
4. What does Paul say about Christ-less religion and human regulations in verses 16-20? How does this apply to us today? In what ways do religious and non-religious people “delight in false humility”?

Mystery of God (verses 2-8)

The knitting together of the church into a unified body clearly includes the growth of love and the growth of proper understanding of the gospel, which leads to the rich blessings of a settled assurance. Living in a loving and forgiving community will support growth in love and understanding of the Good News. All of this promotes the encouragement, comfort, and strengthening of the heart.

The Colossians do not need to go looking for wisdom or knowledge elsewhere because God’s “mystery” is revealed fully in Jesus. Christ sums up in himself all that the OT said about Wisdom (Proverbs 2:1-8). Christ himself is “the mystery of God”—not just a clue or a key to it, as if it were something other than himself. Everything we might want to ask about God and his purpose can and must now be answered with reference to the crucified and risen Jesus, the Messiah. Paul’s repeated descriptions of such understanding as “riches” and “treasure” invite his readers to explore the person and work of Jesus with eagerness.

In 2:4-8, Paul introduces the problem that threatens the readers' faith: “fine-sounding arguments to deceive” an unsuspecting audience (2:4). Certain teachers at Colosse promoted a
philosophy of religion that consists of human traditions and centers on the basic principles of this world (2:8).

Christ-centered faith versus Christ-less religion (verses 9-23)

Paul’s discussion of Chris-centered theology versus Christ-less theology in 2:4-23 is divided into two sections: Christ-centered theology (verses 9-15) and Christ-less theology (verses 16-19).

In 2:9-15, Paul responds to this theological error attacking the Colossians by restating two central claims about Christ on which faith must be founded: (1) Christ is the fullness of the Deity . . . in bodily form (2:9; compare 1:19), and (2) he is the head over every power and authority (2:10; compare 1:18, 20). On this Christ-centered tradition (rather than human traditions) the community can experience God's forgiveness of their sins (2:11-15). Christ is God and Lord over all creation. He is the “fullness of Deity in bodily form” and “head over every power and authority” (verses 9 and 10). All power structures, ancient or modern, whether political, economic, religious, or racial, have the potential to become rivals to Christ, beckoning his followers to submit themselves to them in order to find a fuller security. Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus (12), God did many things for us: made us alive in Christ (13), forgave
us all our sins (14), canceled and nailed to the cross the charges against us along with their regulations (14), and disarmed the powers and authorities that call for our allegiance to them instead of Christ.

In 2:16-25, Paul has lots to say about human regulations and self-righteous religious piety. Paul's begins in 2:16-19 with his rebuke of self-righteous piety. Apparently, there is at least one person in the Colossian congregation who was a self-appointed "spiritual umpire" (see 2:16 and 18) making judgments about what constitutes authentic Christian faith. This person's code of conduct for others is based on what people eat and drink and whether they observe the holy days of the Jewish calendar (2:16, 21). Paul claims these regulations, like the human tradition that informs the deceptive philosophy (2:8), are nothing more than "human commands and teachings," and their effectiveness is based on an "appearance of wisdom" rather than the truth of the gospel (2:22-23).

This spiritual umpire watches to see whether people observes certain holy days and comply with certain dietary regulations and he uses these things to determine the quality of their devotion to God. In response, Paul issues here the first of two commands: “Do not let anyone judge you” (verse 16). The verb for judge is often used of God's final judgment. The list of these celebrations, which includes a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day, is fairly typical. Since the list encompasses annual festivals (such as Passover or Yom Kippur), monthly meetings (such as the New Moon celebration) and the weekly observance of Sabbath, it is evident that Paul's opponents required a rather comprehensive obligation. Within Judaism most of these celebrations were intended to help the community look forward to Messiah's deliverance of Israel from its suffering and to its entrance into God's promised shalom. Thus, for the Christian to participate in these Jewish celebrations was tantamount to a denial of Jesus' Messiahship. Paul's objection is not to religious celebration. Rather, Paul's primary concern here is any observance that does not concentrate the celebrants' attention upon the centrality of Christ alone for salvation. To observe a Jewish calendar of worship seems foolish to Paul when it does not celebrate Jesus. Paul is not anti-Jewish; but he is opposed to those who appeal to Jewish practice to measure and even replace the core convictions of the Christian faith.

The second command expands the first: “Do not let anyone . . . disqualify you for the prize” (verse 18). The verb disqualify literally refers to the negative decision of an umpire. The person Paul has in mind monitors the congregation's readiness for “the prize” and decides against it when the believers' conduct does not accord with the rules of religious celebration (2:16) and self-denial (2:21). Paul seems most interested in defending Christians from burden of self-righteous spirituality, “false humility.” What makes the self-righteous demand for humility false and foolish is that it is not motivated by devotion to Christ. A believer's humility, is proper only when it boasts in what God has accomplished through Christ (Rom 5:1-11). Outward expressions of one's inward piety are judged arrogant and unspiritual when they represent human efforts to attain what God has already granted us in Christ.

**Appearance of Wisdom and False Humility (2:20-23)**

According to Paul, wisdom, whether true or false, is measured by its results. Wisdom is true if it produces a community that worships and bears witness to God in its shared life. Thus, in 2:20-23, Paul's verdict on self-righteous religion is negative: when measured by the "reality" of Christ's death (2:17, 20), self-righteous spirituality "lacks any value" whatsoever (2:23). Paul's Christianity is practical—being in Christ by faith is access to God's grace, which empowers growth and worship (see 2:7). Relying on carefully thought-out ideas or rules of abstinence
rather than on what God has already accomplished for us in Christ is foolish, because it threatens the present results of Christ's work in us.

The main problem Paul addresses in chapter two is the legalistic submission to human regulations, such that observing replaces devotion to Christ. What results is often called "self-righteousness." For Paul, the mark of true religion is not a rigorous compliance to rules of self-denial, but faith in Christ and a life in his Spirit (see Rom 14:13-18).

What finally defines the borders of true Christianity is "being in Christ," where God's grace roots, builds up and strengthens us so that we overflow with thanksgiving (2:7). Notice that God roots us, builds us up, and strengthens us. All we do is respond with thankfulness. We are so accustomed to doing all the work to get the thanks. But, Christianity is primarily about the work of God on our behalf and then our thankfulness for his work.

Any definition of the Gospel that substitutes regulations of self-denial in the place of the grace of God though faith in Christ is spiritually impoverished and ultimately useless. It can’t even do what it claims to do, which is restrain sensual indulgences. Elsewhere, Paul uses even more forceful language. In Philippians 3:7-11, he calls human regulations and Christ-less religious activity “loss” and “dung.”

**Conclusion**

Robert Capon: “Jesus came to raise the dead. He did not come to teach the teachable; He did not come to improve the improvable; He did not come to reform the reformable. None of those things works.”
Introduction

When Paul responds to false teachings he identifies the theological errors and draws out their negative implications for faith and life. For Paul, the problem with bad theology is that it results in distorted notions of Christ and what it means to follow him. His letter to the Colossians contains two sharp discussions. The first discussion is theological (2:4-23). The second discussion is mainly ethical (3:1-4:1): Paul describes the new life believers have in Christ. It is this new life that is imperiled by the false teachings circulating in Colosse.

According to Paul, wisdom is measured by its results. Wisdom is true if it produces a community that worships and bears witness to God in its shared life. Thus, in 2:20-23, Paul's verdict on self-righteous religion is negative: it is impoverished and useless because it can't even do what it claims, which is to restrain sensual indulgences. Paul's Christianity is practical—being in Christ by faith is access to God's grace, which empowers growth and worship (see 2:7).

The critique of false religions is that it results in negative effects or “bad fruit.” The result of the Gospel is new life or “good fruit.” For more on language of “fruit” see Matt 7:16-18, Matt 22:33, Luke 6: 43-44, Galatians 5:22-23, and Colossians 1:10. In Colossians 3, Paul is describing the new life God gives us when we trust in the person and work of Jesus for our righteousness. Paul's vision of the Christian life grows out of his understanding of Christian faith.

Please read Colossians 3 and discuss these questions:

1. Verses 1-4 discuss the new life. What is the basis of our new life?
2. Looking at verses 5-11, what is life in Christ not?
3. According to verses 12-17, what characterizes life in Christ in congregations?
4. According to 3:18-4:1, what characterizes the life in Christ in the home?

Basis of New Life

Sanctification or “the Christian life” is the work of God and the result of the Christ’s death and resurrection. Paul begins chapter 3 with a powerful statement: you have been raised with Christ. He expands on this with two other statements: 1) your life is now hidden with Christ in God (v. 3) and 2) you also will appear with Christ in glory (v. 4). These descriptive statements about the facts of God's salvation for those who are with Christ surround and focus the imperative statements: set your hearts on things above (v. 1) and set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (v. 2). Paul's point is that the logical response to being the recipients of Christ's triumph—indicated by where he now sits at the right hand of God—is that exchange earthly for heavenly norms and values. This exchange of the secular life for the sacred constitutes for Paul the central moral reality of the new life; and he envisages it practically in various codes of Christian conduct that he lists and develops in 3:5-4:1.

For Jesus and Paul, the work of grace is inside out, so that private matters of the heart are always fleshe out in the public actions of the body. What we need is our desires, minds, heart, and loves changed.

Paul taught that God's triumph over sin and death in Christ has already been realized invisibly in heaven and should be realized visibly on earth. The moral frustration we often feel as
believers, when we know what to do but are unable or unwilling to do it, is explained by this spiritual reality: our actual experience of the final triumph of God's grace over human sin awaits Christ's return (Rev 12:10-12).

That Christ is the foundation for Christian ethics is made clear by the four explicit references to Christ in 3:1-4, all of which are located at the center of the passage. This phrase “with Christ” is quite unusual and stresses the decisive importance of Christ for what follows regarding the new life Paul describes.

Again, to show that the new life in Christ is “Christ-centered,” notice that chapter 3 includes three codes of Christian conduct (3:5-10; 3:12-16; 3:18--4:1), each of which concludes with a Christological confession that recalls the central importance of Christ's lordship for the community's obedient response to God's will.

The genius of Paul's ethical teaching is not the various codes he provides to describe the moral life. They contain nothing new. Judaism offered a much more comprehensive morality than did his Christianity. Indeed, the OT had already codified God's will. For Paul the problem is practical; it has to do with the sorts of persons we are and whether we are actually able to do God's will. Paul's moral innovation stems from his Christ-centered theology. His claim is that in Christ we not only are forgiven and redeemed by God but are also transformed into new persons, capable of knowing and doing the will of God. Christ’s death and resurrection triggered a moral revolution.

Below are some quotes showing us the Christ-centered nature of “the Christian life.”

"And Jesus still sets people free. He sets them free by the word of his gospel. This isn't just potential forgiveness; this is actual forgiveness itself. No more ‘if only’ games. This is real. In personal confession and absolution Jesus Christ still sets people free."
- Harold Senkbeil, Sanctification: Christ in Action, p. 171

"It's time to recognize Christian worship for what it is: Christ at work through his Word and sacrament. Rather than focusing on the mind and heart of the worshiper, worship should point to the God who meets us there."
--Harold Senkbeil, Sanctification: Christ in Action, p. 180

“Our life in Christ is a life under his cross. Day by day our sinful nature goes on dying and we go on living with him. This is why the Christian life is not really the Christian in action; it is Christ in action!"
--Harold Senkbeil, Sanctification: Christ in Action, p. 184

"Once it is clear and actually believed that only we who "without works" believe much in Christ are righteous before God, once that preposterous joy actually hits us, a new day dawns. Such righteousness is simply complete in itself. It is like the joy and ecstasy of love. It is its own apology. It needs nothing. The way is cleared for good works."
- Gerhard Forde, On Being a Theologian of the Cross, p. 106

"The reason why abounding grace does not lead to sin lies in the fact that in its radicality it puts an end to the old, not in some species of compromise with the old...The radical forgiveness itself puts the old to death and calls forth the new."
- Gerhard Forde, A More Radical Gospel, p. 10
New Life in Christ

After introducing the essential Christ-centered structure of his ethics (3:1-4), Paul goes on to characterize what a life in Christ is not (3:5-11) before then describing what characterizes life in Christ both within the congregation (3:12-17) and within the home (3:18--4:1).

On the surface, there is really nothing distinctively Christian about avoiding the vices in 3:5-11 or pursuing the virtues in 3:12-17. Moreover, the household code enlisted in 3:18-4:1 generally arranges the various relationships within a family according to prevailing standards, even those found within the pagan world.

For Paul, the moral content of the believer's life has not changed with the coming of Christ. The will of a good and holy God did not change with Christ's coming. The real issue is one of moral competency: believers are made new and transformed and God changes their desires so they love what he commands. The contrast between vice and virtue that Paul draws in this passage is another way of speaking of the believer's conversion. Pauline ethics as "missionary ethics," since virtuous character presumes conversion, and conversion presumes the preaching of the gospel.

When God rescues us from the kingdom of darkness and transports us into the kingdom of God's triumphant Son, the natural result is for us to "put off" vice and "put on" virtue. In this sense, Pauline ethics is descriptive of transformed life rather than prescriptive: the result or fruit of "being in Christ" is to love what God commands and to want to live according to his will.

To embrace the truth about God's grace is to receive God's grace and to be empowered for living according to God's will (Colossians 1:9-10).

Grace transforms into new creatures. Bad theology will have its moral effect. The Christless theology championed by some in the Colossian church has resulted in a spurious holiness which supposes that "false humility and . . . harsh treatment of the body" (2:23) constitute a worshipful response to God. In Colosse, then, the issues at stake are not only a false theology that replaces the redemptive importance of Christ's work with "spiritual beings" and "human traditions," but ethical matters as well.

Colossians 3 is an integral part of Paul's argument against bad theology. It is the moral flip side of his theological argument against the "hollow and deceptive philosophy" that threatens the Colossians' confidence in Christ as the only mediator between God and humanity. Paul has shaped the timeless truths of his moral exhortation into a specific response to the Colossian crisis.
The Supremacy of Christ: A Study in Colossians
Session 5—Jesus and His Community (chapter 4)

Introduction
The concluding section of each of Paul's letters contains his benediction, typically expressed as a prayer or doxology. Ancient writers usually added various greetings, specific instructions and general exhortations to their closings. Paul is no different, although he baptizes these literary conventions with the distinctive phrases of his Christian ministry. Paul's goodbye to the Colossian believers includes exhortations concerning their evangelistic work (4:2-6) and internal relations (4:7-17), before concluding with his benedictory doxology (4:18).

Please read Colossians 4 and discuss these questions:

1. What do verses 2-6 tell us about evangelism? Discuss how Paul offers exhortations regarding evangelism and our prayers, our lives, and our words.
2. What do verses 7-17 tell us about relationships within the church?

Evangelism in Jesus’ Community (4:2-6)
Paul gives the Colossians three exhortations regarding evangelism, or spreading the gospel in Colossae. First is to pray for the spreading of the gospel: “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert with thanksgiving” (4:2). Specifically, Paul asks the Colossians to pray for God to continue to open doors for the clear preaching of the gospel (4:3-4). Also, it is important to notice the connection here between prayer and thanksgiving, common in Paul’s letters—for example: “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6) and “pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18). Prayer was a central mark of the early church (“They devoted themselves… to prayer”—Acts 2:42). Moreover, since we are made righteous through the blood Jesus Christ shed on the cross to atone for the sins of the world, we can be assured that our prayers make a difference: “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

Second is to spread the gospel with our lives: “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time” (4:5). Spreading the gospel with our lives comes down to responding to the love God has given us in Jesus Christ by sharing that love with others: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another… let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:16, 18). This hearkens back to Jesus’ words to his disciples at the Last Supper (“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”—John 13:35) and his summary of the law (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind… You shall love your neighbor as yourself”—Matthew 22:37, 39). Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who produces that love in us as part of the “fruit of the Spirit” in our lives: the “fruit of the Spirit is love…” (Galatians 5:22).

Third is to spread the gospel with our words: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (4:6). Paul emphasizes the
importance of our speech being “gracious,” that is, reflecting the grace, the unearned one-way love of God. He also emphasizes answering people as opposed to confronting, arguing, or challenging them with the gospel. It is the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts to draw us to God (1 Corinthians 12:3), and often spreading the gospel with our words simply means answering the questions people have as they begin to sense the Holy Spirit drawing them to a relationship with him through Jesus Christ. We also see this in the First Letter of Peter: “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (3:15b-16a). Evangelism thus involves prayer for God to open doors for the spreading of the gospel, spreading the gospel with our lives, and spreading the gospel with our words.

Internal Relations in Jesus’ Community (4:7-17)
While this concluding passage has an eye to the situation facing his Colossian readers, it actually falls outside of the letter's main body, where Paul addresses the audience's spiritual crisis more directly and pastorally. These verses are not part of Paul's polemic against his opponents. They rather reflect his general interest in the spiritual well-being of any congregation under his care, regardless of the particular problems it might be facing. His exhortations in this letter's benediction convey a universal message that is equally valid for any congregation. Yet this passage is also interesting because it provides us with a window into early Christianity and offers an intriguing model that clarifies the dynamics of congregational life.

Personal relationships within the community are vitally important to Paul. In this section he commends by name several coworkers in gospel ministry, including Tychicus (a companion of Paul on his third missionary journey), Onesimus (a slave on whose behalf Paul wrote his Letter to Philemon), Aristarchus (suffered with Paul in Ephesus—see Acts 19:29, and was in prison with Paul in Rome), Mark (a companion of Paul on his first missionary journey and the writer of the Gospel according to Mark), Barnabas (also a companion of Paul on his first missionary journey; his name means “son of encouragement”—Acts 4:36), Justus (helped Paul in his ministry at Corinth), Epaphras (preached the gospel in Colossae—see 1:7), Luke (the “beloved physician” who wrote the Gospel According to Luke and its sequel, the Book of Acts), Demas (did gospel work with Paul in Rome but later forsook him—see II Timothy 4:10), and Nympha (a wealthy woman who hosted gatherings of the church in her home). This demonstrates that Paul did not see himself as a lone warrior, but as one of many servants of the Lord working to spread the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. He is also affectionate and encouraging about them, describing them as “beloved,” “faithful,” and “servants of Christ.”

It is also significant that Paul concludes this section with a word directed at an individual named Archippus, “See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord” (4:17). Archippus is also mentioned in Paul’s Letter to Philemon (2) and apparently he responded to Paul’s encouragement, for church tradition maintains that eventually he served as Bishop of Laodicea and was martyred. And like Archippus, we know the Lord will complete the work he has begun in all our lives through Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6). In this section we clearly see Paul’s emphasis on the importance of loving, supportive, and prayerful relationships within the Christian community for the sake of spreading the gospel.
Bill Hybels writes about the church in *Courageous Leadership* (pp. 21-23): “There is nothing like the local church when it’s working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources for those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, and the disillusioned. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness. The radical message of transforming love has been given to the church.”

**Benedictory Doxology (4:18)**

Paul concludes this letter: “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.” Paul often noted that he personally wrote the finally benedictory blessing and greeting in a letter—see 1 Corinthians 16:21; Galatians 6:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:17; and Philemon 19. This is consistent with how Paul often shared his heart with and personal affection for the recipients of his letters. He also reminds the Christians at Colossae that he is in prison as he writes this letter, “Remember my chains.” This is not a call for sympathy, but a call for prayer on his behalf.

Finally, Paul concludes his Letter to the Colossians, “Grace be with you” (4:18). Paul begins and ends each of his thirteen letters of the New Testament by proclaiming the grace of God to his recipients, which makes sense because it is the grace of God, the unearned one-way love of God, that is revealed in Jesus Christ (John 1:17), expressed through his death and resurrection (Romans 3:21-26; 5:8; 1 John 4:10), and responded to by faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is the grace of God that will help us all the way to heaven, as John Newton wrote in his classic hymn, *Amazing Grace*: “‘tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home” (Hymn 671, verse 4).