



Bible Study

October 21, 2015

Colossians 1:18-23

Luke 9:44-50

Colossians 1:18-23 (NKJV) -

Brethren, He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Luke 9:44-50 (NKJV) – The Lord said, “Let these words sink down into your ears, for the Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men.” But they did not understand this saying, and it was hidden from them so that they did not perceive it; and they were afraid to ask Him about this saying. Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, “Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great.” Now John answered and said, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side.”

Commentary -

The Church at Colossae was somewhat different from many of the other churches that St. Paul planted for the Lord's Vineyard as he traveled throughout the Roman world. Unlike many of St. Paul's other letter destinations, Colossae was not a city of any great importance. It was, for all intents and purposes, a small town serving as a way-station along the trade road leading from the major port of Ephesus to the Euphrates river, which was used to bring people and goods from Greece and points west to Mesopotamia and Persia. Other than serving as a rest stop for trade caravans and travellers, Colossae was essentially a backwater.

As such, its population was very different than many of the other cities to whom the Apostle writes. In general, the major cities of the Roman Empire were possessed of Jewish populations who

had been scattered throughout the Roman provinces. The synagogues these Judean expatriates set up in these cities were St. Paul's first stop on arriving in the city, and the Gentiles who participated in the outer circle of these communities, the God-Fearers, made up most of his early converts to Christianity. Colossae seems to have no such Judean population.

Neither had St. Paul actually been to Colossae, or established the Colossian church. Rather, having heard that a Christian community was forming there, and having indirect connections to a few prominent Christians in that community, St. Paul writes to them to instruct and encourage them. The Christians there were, for the most part, converts from 'pure' paganism, with very little familiarity with Judean traditions or the Holy Scriptures. The Apostle therefore writes to them to demonstrate that Christ is the fulfillment of their religious yearnings just as He fulfilled the promises made to the Judean people in the Old Testament.

The religion formerly believed by the Colossians was an early form of Gnosticism, and held many similarities to Eastern religions of today. They believed in a type of pantheism, that everything that existed was part of the Divine, a kind of infinite God above the other gods that they referred to as the 'pleroma' in Greek, or the fullness. They believed that everything that existed was part of that 'fullness' that had fallen away through ignorance. The gods had fallen away the least from the 'pleroma', followed by human beings, followed by animals and then objects. They believed that through pursuing secret knowledge, by means of mysterious rituals, one could work one's way back up until he or she disappeared back into the 'fullness' of everything.

In place of this false religion, St. Paul places the Christian faith. He posits there is one God, the Father, and that the Father has a Son, Jesus Christ. But this Son is not some secondary being who has fallen away from the fullness of the Father, but is Himself the fullness, the 'pleroma', the beginning, the preeminent one. And for St. Paul, what separates creation from the Father who created it is the wickedness of human beings. We as human beings are not 'ignorant' of some secret hidden truths contained in mysterious ritual. Rather, we have consciously chosen to do evil, to bring evil into this world, and thereby alienate it from the Father. Jesus Christ, however, is through His flesh, through having been made man, reconciling the entire Creation to the Father by becoming a part of it, and uniting it to God in His Person, while through His death on the Cross, He has destroyed our sins so that no longer are we God's enemies, but can now be presented to Him as holy and blameless. This Gospel is the teaching that can lead all of God's creatures to salvation, and it is not hidden in some dark and esoteric ritual. Rather, St. Paul travels the world proclaiming it openly for all to hear.

It being the case that Christ has done, and is doing these things in the world, what then do Christians do to participate in this salvation? St. Paul says that we are to continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast. What does this mean in practical terms? Christ Himself tells us in today's Gospel reading. Though Christ is the fullness of Divinity, He possesses within Himself everything which is God, He does not come into the created world clothed in His Glory with great displays of power and might. Rather, He came into the world as a helpless infant, as a child. He came of age in crushing poverty, under political oppression. Finally He suffered and died not at a ripe old age surrounded by family, nor in battle, but was publicly executed as a common criminal in a humiliating and excruciatingly painful way.

Likewise, those of us who would follow Him, who genuinely desire to be forgiven of our sins and to be reconciled to God, must do likewise and become servants. To truly be a servant means to be a servant of all, of every man, woman, and child whom we meet and encounter. This means to humble ourselves in such a way that it is impossible for us to judge others, because we are concerned only with serving our Master, Christ, and He has commanded us to receive every person we meet as if that person is Jesus Himself. The path that leads through death, and into life eternal, leads through the Cross. If we wish to be great, and to share in the Life of God Himself, then we must make ourselves small in the eyes of this world. We must give up the things of this world in order to store up for ourselves treasure in the next.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us never cease in our faith, but let us be steadfast in following our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ. Let us never judge anyone, but let us be concerned only with the service that we might be able to render to the Lord. Let us not seek opportunities to be considered great, and let us never look upon service as an obligation, as some minimum standard that must be met before we move on to other things which are our real pursuit. Rather, let us joyfully set aside the things in this world that we might think we want, but which do not satisfy, in favor of the fullness of life and love and peace which dwell within Christ Himself.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) In today's Gospel, Christ tells us that those among us who want to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven must become the least, and must become a servant even to little children. Do you actively seek opportunities to serve, to give, and to show hospitality and kindness to others? Or do you view these things as burdens? Do you look for more chances to serve Christ, or to avoid and minimize your responsibilities and commitments? When the things you view as obligations are complete, do you look for more ways to help others, or do you hoard your remaining time and energy and wealth for yourself?
- 2) As the Lord attempted to show St. John when questioned about the others, beyond His disciples, who were casting out demons and doing other works in the name of Jesus, all of us are servants of the same Master, whether we be obedient or not disobedient. It is not the job of one servant to judge the value of another, or to tell his fellow servant what he or she should or shouldn't be doing. That job belongs to the Master, to whom every servant has to give an account of his actions. Do you find yourself comparing yourself to other Christians, either favorably or unfavorably? Do you categorize others as being 'good Christians' or 'bad Christians', or even condemn some people as not being Christian at all based on them behaving or understanding things of the faith differently than you? Do you spend more time thinking and talking about your own behavior, so as to have a clean conscience before Christ, in preparation for the day of judgment, or thinking and talking about the behavior of others?
- 3) In today's epistle reading, St. Paul teaches us that the reason we do not experience the fullness of God's Presence in our life, the reason we don't know Christ as well as we would like, the reason we struggle in the spiritual life, is because of our own sinfulness. Many of us try to approach God through praise and worship and prayer, seeking to have spiritual experiences, but we neglect repentance. How much of your prayer life is spent asking God for things you desire, be they material things, health, or even spiritual gifts, for yourself and others, compared to confessing your sins? Do you struggle to 'have faith', meaning to believe that God exists when he seems far away, or do you struggle to keep His commandments, disobedience to which makes us unable to see and experience Him? Do you want God to bless you in this world, or heal you to prepare you for the world to come?

Questions or Comments? FrStephen@stgeorgecharleston.org

Note from the Author – No rights reserved. If you find anything good, or helpful, or worthwhile in these bible studies from week to week, feel free to take and use it as you see fit. I do not need credit.