Growing Up: Firmly Rooted

Colossians 2:6-19

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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 My father is a forester, just like his father before him. This means, more than anything else, my dad has studied and gained a great deal of knowledge about the forest and the things that make up a forest, namely, trees. Growing up, I remember my dad being at school for Smokey Bear programs and going out during fire season to fight forest fires, but as an adult, I understand that a lot of my dad’s job is about understanding trees and helping those who manage trees do it better.

 I did not inherit my father’s love for nor understanding of trees. My knowledge of the components of a tree is rudimentary at best: there are the leaves, of course, and the trunk, and somewhere down there at the bottom, below ground, are roots. Yet it is here, in the subterranean aspects of the tree, that I understand a little bit, because my interest and training is in the study of a different sort of root: history. For the tree, roots provide both support, anchoring the tree against wind and storm, and nourishment, drawing nutrients and water from the soil to sustain the tree’s growth. Like with the tree, our historical roots – whether of family or nation – provide both the support and nourishment; an understanding of our past as a family or nation helps us have a grounded view of our own situation, and provides inspiration for growing as a tribe or society. Our past helps us understand who we are, upholds us in difficult times, and reminds us of what is important as we step into the future. Our roots are important, whether we are a nation, a family, a person, or a tree.

 They are also important for us as followers of Jesus as we continue to grow up in Christ. When we come to faith, we start to put down roots into the soil that is life with Christ. In him and from him we draw nourishment for our souls; he gives us what we need to grow in faith. In him and from him we also find the strength to endure in the face of life’s trials and storms; our faith is often what we can hold on to when financial crises hit, our health worsens, or we lose someone dear. The teachings of Jesus give us guidance to navigate the winding roads of life, the example of Jesus gives us someone to model ourselves after, and the salvation Jesus provides gives us hope for the future and the joy of knowing God as our father. Our knowledge of and relationship with Jesus is the foundation of our faith, and if we are rooted in him, we are able to grow and flourish as his followers whatever may come. This is Paul’s teaching for the young Christians in Colossae, and it is his teaching for us today as we grow up in Christ.

 Yet Paul knows that the Colossian Christians are vulnerable to being uprooted, cut off from the very lifeblood of their faith. In the heart of our passage today, he issues a warning to the new followers of Jesus in Colossae: don’t be led astray. “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.”[[1]](#footnote-1) These words point to the dangers of losing a firm grip on that on which we depend for our nourishment and our security as people of faith: the teaching and witness of Jesus Christ.

 What is surprising, though, is just what philosophies and human traditions Paul refers to in this passage. In today’s world, we may hear this as a warning to not allow scientific teaching or secular influences to have too great a hold over our minds and perspectives, and that is a good word to some extent. However, when we look at this in the context of Paul’s writing, we find that he is warning against something even more dangerous: Paul warns against the influence of misguided religion or skewed theology on the follower of Jesus, in this case, misguided Jewish religion or skewed theology. Paul, remember, was a Jew proclaiming the Jewish Messiah, Jesus – but not all of his Jewish Christian brethren saw things as he did. Some preached that new Gentile Christians like the Colossians had to get circumcised. Some preached that new Gentile Christians like the Colossians had to observe Jewish restrictions on food and drink. Some preached that new Gentile Christians like the Colossians had to observe the Jewish holy days – like festivals and Sabbaths – as the Jews did. Some even preached that new Gentile Christians like the Colossians had to adopt beliefs that were even outside of mainstream Jewish thought of the day, like abstaining from all things pleasurable, worshiping a gallery of angels, or putting too much stock in ecstatic or charismatic visions to be REALLY spiritual.

 These other preachers, Paul says, are in the wrong. He states this explicitly through his command at the end of the passage, in verses 16-19. He states this implicitly through his adoption and refocusing of circumcision from a physical sign to a spiritual change in the lives of Jesus’ followers. He even states this through a pun that we miss in our English translations: the word in verse 8 about not letting anyone “take you captive” looks and sounds a lot like the word “synagogue,” the place of prayer and worship for many Jews and Jewish Christians alike.[[2]](#footnote-2) Needless to say, Paul wanted to make sure the Colossians understood this point: their faith didn’t depend on any ritual or regulation. It depended solely on the action of God in Christ. In Jesus, all who follow him are buried to sin. In Jesus, all who follow him are raised to new life. In Jesus, all who follow him have their sins erased. In Jesus, all who follow him have the ultimate victory. So, Paul says, keep this in mind – stay rooted in Christ.

 Today, we don’t often face the temptation to adopt the Jewish religious rules wholesale. I don’t know many Christians who would condemn a Christ-follower who chose to eat shellfish or a cheeseburger, and I don’t know many Christians who would insist that a new Christian convert needed to be circumcised. Yet we, like the Colossians, are beset by philosophies that look to take us captive and empty deceit, according to human tradition, that is not according to Christ. Some of it comes from outside the church, outside the faith, but so much of it comes from inside. If we want to mature and grow up in Christ, we need to stay rooted and remain established in the faith, just as we were taught.

 One of these philosophies that looks to take us captive in a most insidious way is the teaching of the so-called prosperity gospel. It has been around for centuries – it is even alluded to in the Bible – and it’s main point goes like this: the righteous are those who God blesses with material and physical riches, and the disobedient are saddled with poverty and pain, so any wealth or blessing is a sign of God’s favor, and any difficulty or heartache is a sign of God’s discipline or rejection. Such a perspective encourages a system of individualism and greed, leaving the neediest and the most vulnerable to fend for themselves while bearing a stigma of apparent immorality – they *must* have done something wrong, or God would have blessed them! Yet the Scriptures explicitly reject such a viewpoint; Jesus even went so far as to state in Luke 6, [Luke 6:20-26 on screen]. Remain rooted in Jesus, Paul tells us, and don’t be taken captive. This is the way to grow up in Christ.

 Another misguided religious philosophy Paul would say leads us away from our roots in Christ is the teaching that, at Christ’s return, the earth ceases to exist and we all go somewhere else. Growing up, I was obsessed with reading the *Left Behind* books, a series of stories about how the world would effectively fall completely apart, with God’s people being raptured away and the rest of humanity suffering for seven years before Christ returns a second time and wipes it all away. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins didn’t come up with this idea on their own; various preachers and authors have promoted the concept of the Rapture for about 200 to 250 years. Such teaching tempts us to not care too much about what happens to our world, or even the human population, because it’s all going to end soon anyways at the return of Christ. As one writer summed up this argument, “Why wallpaper the house if it’s going to be knocked down tomorrow?”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Yet when we carefully look at the New Testament, we find that Jesus’ return isn’t about punishing people or destroying the world; it’s about restoring all of creation to what God intended it to be. Jesus himself, in both versions of his famous prayer we heard earlier in the service, prays for God’s kingdom to come – and in the more famous version from Matthew, he prays for it to come on earth as it is in heaven.[[4]](#footnote-4) Paul speaks of the redemption of creation and God setting it free from its bondage to decay at the coming of his Son.[[5]](#footnote-5) And in Revelation, John the prophet tells us, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”[[6]](#footnote-6) It goes on to describe what this new life with God in our midst will be like – no death or mourning or crying or pain, but rather joy and hope and life on a new earth in the city of God. Far from being destroyed, the Scriptures teach us that God will redeem and restore the good creation he made, and that he will dwell with us here at the last – a word of hope that matters not just for eternity, but in the here and now. In light of this, remain rooted in Jesus, Paul tells us, and don’t be taken captive. This is the way to grow up in Christ.

 A third dangerously mistaken belief that is often tempting for us to follow as Christians is similar to that Paul addressed in the end of our Colossian passage today: teaching that faith requires certain behaviors to be authentic. The teaching of the Old and New Testaments is that a close relationship with God changes us, and affects our behaviors – but the temptation has always been to make certain behaviors requirements for being part of the faithful people of God. Whether Pharisees in Jesus’ day worrying more about how many herbs they were tithing, people in Paul’s day requiring Gentiles to be circumcised, people in my grandparents’ day requiring no card-playing or movies on Sunday, or people today requiring their fellow believers to dress up for church or skip R-rated movies or using certain churchy language. We can become so religious that we lose sight of the ongoing growth process that is following Jesus…and that can, in fact, get in the way of our own maturing as followers of Jesus.

 Preacher Tony Campolo tells the story of his son, Bart. Bart Campolo followed his father into Christian ministry at a young age, with a special focus on teenagers and college students as well as on the poor and oppressed. One weekend he scheduled a retreat for several hundred inner-city kids from tough neighborhoods. Due to some last-minute complications, he and his van-load of kids was late heading out for camp. On the road, Bart received a phone call filled with desperation: there were 200 kids at the camp already, and only 2 counselors! They needed Bart to get there in a hurry.

 But, of course, Murphy’s Law intervened. Bart hit traffic. Then there was road work. Finally, as he cleared all the obstructions, the van’s rear tire blew out. Gritting his teeth, Bart pulled the van over to the side of the road, got out the tools, and started changing the tire. He got the tire off…and the van slipped off the jack, crashing to the ground. At that point, Tony says, his son blurted out a “religious statement that had no theological content.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In short, Bart started cussing. It was several more hours before he got everything fixed and he got to the camp with his van-load of campers.

 When the weekend was over and Bart was heading home with his group of teenagers, the young man sitting next to him said, “It was a great weekend. I decided to become a Christian this weekend and that’s really important.”

 Bart, really pleased with the young man’s comment, asked him, “What changed you? What caused you to become a Christian? Was it the speakers or the Bible study programs, or did someone personally talk to you about Jesus?”

 “Nah, none of those things,” the young man said. “It was when the van fell off the jack and smashed to the ground and you let loose with those words that you shouldn’t have said. I figured then, ‘If he can be a Christian, anybody can be a Christian.’”

 Sometimes, we let ourselves be deluded into thinking that being a Christian is about doing the right things and being perfect, above what we label unreligious behavior. Jesus never said that. He never asked the fishermen he called – hard-working, blue-collar men who probably were not the most well-mannered – whether they had their act together or not. For Jesus, it wasn’t about the outward appearance or being overly pious. It was about the heart, the relationship, the desire to follow him. That’s all he asked them to do – follow him. He would take care of the change. He would take care of the transformation. What mattered was that they chose to follow him – and he took care of the rest. Just like Paul said, he changed their hearts, he buried them with him in baptism, he raised them to new life in Christ. It wasn’t about what they did – it was about what Jesus did. That’s true for us as well. We shouldn’t let ourselves be taken captive by anyone who says we have to have it all together to follow Jesus, or be perfect as we follow him. Understanding that is part of what it means to grow up in Christ.

 When we can avoid being captured, caught up in, these and so many other tempting ideas about faith that are not at all what Christ taught, when we keep our eyes on Jesus and root ourselves in him alone, we discover something amazing: we grow. Paul testified to this: when we hold fast to Jesus, we grow with a growth that is from God. That is the only way we truly become mature Christians, the only way we really grow up in Christ: we let God cause us to grow. How? By sticking to the way of Jesus. His teaching and example shows us the way. His death and resurrection open the way to us. All we have to do is keep our eyes on him and follow in his steps. Are we following Jesus alone? Are we growing up in Christ? Let us pray.

1. Colossians 2:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters, 165-66 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wright, Surprised by Scripture, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Luke 11:2, Matthew 6:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Romans 8:19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rev. 21:3b-4a [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Stories that Feed Your Soul, 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)