

The Colossian Heresy And Laodiceanism

Erosion of the Faith Once Delivered

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Given 13-Jul-19; Sermon #1497

Radio talk show host and commentator on the human condition and the present scene, Rush Limbaugh, talks occasionally about the need for educated and aware citizens to be familiar with history. His recommendation is rooted in George Santayana's maxim, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." That is a slight modification of Edmund Burke's dictum, "Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it." The quotation is often misquoted as, "Those who ignore history are *doomed* to repeat it." It just shows you how pessimistic those bad misquoters are.

Anyway, the meaning is the same for any one of those three however you take it. Mankind has an uncanny ability to make the same mistakes over and over and over again. Solomon points this out in Ecclesiastes 1:9, "That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun." Time marches relentlessly forward. It is linear. It goes straight towards the future. But history tends to be a series of cycles in which similar ideas, actions, even big things like empires rise and fall only to be essentially duplicated within a few years, maybe 50 years or 100 years.

The classic example from our age is Hitler making the same mistake as Napoleon about 130 years before in invading Russia. And Russia, the Russian soldiers, the Russian military elite did the same strategy. They used their large geography to draw Napoleon first and then Hitler into the Motherland of Russia around their capital city and then let winter take its toll. Both of them barely escaped with anything after the Russian winter took care of them those two times.

Rush Limbaugh often makes this remark about history in reference to the younger generation. Although he admits that really every generation makes the same mistake, just like the principle of not learning history. We just see the younger generation exposed by it because we can say, "Ha ha. Well,

we've experienced all this before, and now we see it, and these guys they do not have a clue."

But he posits that, for most people, history begins at their birth. You can see how that could be. You do not know what happened before your birth and most people are condemned not to even worry about what happened before their birth. In school we try to help them a little bit to learn what happened before their birth, but really, most people tend to be pretty self-centered and it is just what they have experienced that happens to be important. They sit at the center of their world and anything that happened without them or before them is unimportant. It is irrelevant. They are busy with their own life and so they do not see these patterns of history because they are not concerned about them at all. They are old news, old fashioned, stuff that happened a long time ago, fifty years. For those of us who are over 50, fifty years is not all that long. But to the younger generation it is, it is a lifetime, and they think, "Well, what could anything that happened then have to do with me?" And so it is just this bias against what happened in the past that a lot of people seem to have.

History to them, as I mentioned before, is their personal experience. And for a young person, their personal experience is a mighty light basket. They do not have a whole lot to base their ideas on because they have not done anything. They have not lived, they have not learned, they have not gone through some of the struggles that other people have. And so they are ignorant in many ways. It is not a put down, it is just a fact of life.

So we have people like Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, all of 29 years old, sounding to us almost idiotic in some of the things she says. But she is deliberately, maybe; woefully, definitely; ignorant of historical examples and historical lessons because, with the education that she has had and her own personality, she discounts them as beside the point. They are inapplicable, they are irrelevant, because remember, she is a progressive, we are so much smarter now. We have learned so much since then. We do not need those examples. And so she ignores all this history and, I should say, especially a history of the outworking of human nature, which gives you a great lift, a foot up, if you will, in terms of being able to understand how things *actually* work, how human people, both in singular and in groups, react to things and you can learn a whole lot.

I have a recent example. I just saw this in my notes. She went to the immigrant detention center down there on the border and she started comparing it to the concentration camps during World War Two. She had no idea, no historical background to see the difference. And so she got in trouble with those who are a little bit more aware of what is actually going on and has gone on in our history.

Now, unlike Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, we need to be a little bit more adept, a little bit more into these sorts of things. With a little bit of information, a little bit of history, a little bit of thinking, we can begin to find *patterns* in historical human behavior. It does not take that much insight—just a little knowledge, a little bit of understanding—and you can see these things as they played out in history. And if you are smart enough in looking at the current scene, you can see how they are playing out in the present scene and saying, "We know where this ends."

Let us take an example that is maybe on the outside of history, but you probably did not learn this type of history in school unless you were an artist. I am talking about art history. Let us just take some examples from that. We will start in about 1750. The type of art at the time was Neoclassical art. It was the Neoclassical period. Those artists were faithfully studying and imitating, mimicking, the classic art of Greece and Rome, and the Greeks and the Romans were very interested in perfection. They were trying to find the perfect form and their art was trying to follow the perfect form so that they would, in their art, be like almost perfect reality.

Then, at the same time, there was another type of artists coming along and this was the Romantic artist in the Romantic period. And they began to paint pictures that we would call socially aware, or they were woke, in the modern parlance, and they they were looking at things like poverty or people who were drug addicted or addicted to liquor. And they would paint these things that were going on, as well as other things, flights of the fancy, imagination. They would paint the gods and goddesses and they would paint other things like religious works. But they were letting their imaginations go and painting things that were not necessarily realistic, but they were very fine paintings themselves.

And then, after that, Realism popped in the 1830s. That was about depicting the now, the way things are, people's personal experiences. And so the paintings that you see combined classical Romantic things, but these were what the people themselves had personally seen and experienced. So it was realistic, realism.

Then in 1860, Impressionism came on the scene, and they had a different idea. They said that art was just an impression of reality. You know, the Impressionist paintings look like they are blurred a little bit, like the people were nearsighted and they could not quite make out what was going on and they painted perfectly what they saw or what they could not focus on, but they gave an *impression* of what was out there. (I happen to like Impressionism and maybe it is because I have been nearsighted all my life. Who knows? But I tend to like Monet and I have a couple of those paintings up in my office. Not the real paintings. I do not get paid that much. Cheap prints.)

But like I said, art was just an impression of reality and so they jettisoned form, which a lot of these other ones were big on. There was a way to do it. But Impression says we do not need that, what we need to emphasize is light and color and you will see that in a lot of Impressionistic paintings, that whether they are dark or whether they are light, it is a big part of the picture. And then the colors that they used are supposed to impress upon you certain feelings or what have you. So those things, light and color, became paramount and they insisted in their workshops, their training, their apprentices and such, that they should experiment without limits.

And so they did, because after the Impressionists came, Post Impressionism, like Matisse, and as you are getting further and further away, they became Expressionists. And then Pablo Picasso came along and you had Cubism, and then you had Futurism and Surrealism. You can imagine what the surrealism was like. Now, currently there is a lot of different styles: Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art like Andy Warhol, Performance Art, Conceptual Art, Digital Art. And worst of all, Shock Art.

You notice the trend? The names that have been given to these little periods of historical art tell you how things have gone in art. It started with aiming at classical perfection, mimicking perfection. And in about a century and a half,

this had eroded to the confusion of Picasso. Have you ever tried to figure out why the ear is over here on Picasso when it should be over there? It is confusing. I am sure he had a valid, good reason for it. But to me it comes across as just strange, weird, confusing. And then after Picasso, it quickly degraded into these other forms, ending with Shock Art that pushes the bounds of decency. It has no order. It is just out there, trying to shock you into something. I do not know what.

But what we see, just in this little snippet out of art history, we see the course of human nature, we see the course of this world. It begins with high principles and aiming toward perfection and expands imaginatively into new areas. It begins to test the boundaries of convention and then goes into full rebellion against them, against societal norms, until it lands in confusion and finally, perversion. Usually, at this point, something horrible happens, something very terrible. A war, some sort of atrocity, famine, devastation, total societal breakdown, whatever it happens to be, comes upon the scene and it resets the cycle. History, then, starts over again and repeats itself and the same parts of the wheel, as it were, each come around and we go through a very similar thing.

Thus, we look at this as a church and its various forms worldwide, us, other groups, we have been warning that we are on the brink of the end of the age. Because the signs are there. We see how things have devolved over all these years and we are at the point of shock art! Is that not maybe right at the end of the cycle?

Now, this happens in religion too. This same course of human nature. It happens in the church. Mark [Schindler] said in his sermonette that if it is in the world, it is going to be in the church because we have to live in the world and we bring those things into the church with us. I am sorry, but we are not all perfect and we happen to like things that perhaps we should not like, and we end up bringing those things with us into the church.

Human nature, whether it is in us or out in the world, always wants to prod and push the limits that God has set up, rather than play quietly within them. We have had boundaries set up for us by God and if we stay within those

boundaries, life is good and we can play through the whole playground of what God has given us to do, and it is enjoyable and we can get a great deal out of it.

But there are some of us, like the sheep against the fence, who is always rubbing the fence down and wants to try to knock it over so they could get at the grass is greener stuff that God has said you should not eat. There is a reason why the boundary is there, but that is how it works. And soon, we are talking about religion remember. The faith once delivered to the saints begin to look like a Picasso painting, as people begin to add, subtract, move this thing here, adjust, redefine, undermine, and obscure certain parts of the truth of God. And before long it looks nothing like the gospel that Jesus preached, and people are living lives nothing like the life of Jesus Christ.

Let us go to Galatians 1 where Paul testifies to us that that was the case in his time. We are looking at Galatians. Galatians was written in the early 50s AD. Paul was likely converted maybe 10 or 12 years before this, fairly late in the 30s AD. So we are talking a dozen years, maybe. And he writes this to the Galatians who were a young church at the time.

Galatians 1:6-7 I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another [it has elements of the true gospel]; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

So immediately they get taught what is right by Paul and others who have God's Spirit, and it seems like within just a little time, just a few years, there are people trying to pervert it. It is the course of human nature. It is the way things work. We try to accommodate ourselves rather than try to do what God wants us to do. And we put in this little addition or we take this little subtraction away and pretty soon what we learned at the beginning is not the same as what we are practicing now.

Since my last sermon on the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, I have been pondering the question: How did the Laodiceans get to the point that Christ was about to vomit them out of His mouth? What was the

process? How did that work? I will attempt to answer that question in this sermon today using Paul's epistle to the Colossians. We will gather our facts and hints from his warnings to those Colossians.

The reason why I think we can make this work is because Colossae was only ten miles away from Laodicea. It was a sister church. We could even call it in the same pastorate and so what was happening at Colossae was probably also happening at Laodicea. They had the same basic social milieu and so they had the same false ministers and the same false teachings. And we are going to try to do a little detective work and try to figure out how it happened that Laodicea had gotten to the point where Christ was about to spew them out of His mouth.

I just mentioned here, recall that Laodicea sits between two other biblical cities, Hierapolis, which is six miles north of Laodicea, and Colossae, which is ten miles to the east. So you had these three cities in a kind of an "L." You had Colossae on the east and then you had Laodicea ten miles to the west and then you had Hierapolis which was six miles or so to the north. They were in very close proximity. They could easily fellowship with one another. It would take a nice little walk to get from one city to another, but it was not so terrible that they did not do it. If they had a donkey it was even faster maybe, and by cart, or however, they probably did a fair amount of fellowshiping together.

All three cities were evangelized originally by Epaphras, probably, as I mentioned last time, somewhere around 55 AD, 54 to 56, 53 to 55. We not exactly sure when that was. But we do see, if we go to the book of Colossians, that there were a lot of connections there that we should be aware of. So I am going to go to Colossians the first chapter and we will start to see some of these connections. We will start with Epaphras here. Talking about the truth of the gospel.

Colossians 1:6-8 which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth; as you learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ in your behalf, who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.

He is saying Epaphras at some point went out and he evangelized these three cities, certainly Colossae and Laodicea and probably likely Hierapolis, but it is not mentioned specifically here. And then he ministered to them for a while, got to know them, learned about them, thought they were faithful, and he brought this information back to the apostle Paul. Let us go to chapter 4, a couple of pages over. We will read verses 12-17.

Colossians 4:12-17 Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, greets you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those who are in Hierapolis. [here Hierapolis is added to the list] Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you. Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea [there is Laodicea mentioned], in Nymphas and the church that is in his house. [Remember I said last time it is probably Nympha and the church that is in *her* house.] Now when this epistle is read among you [that is the Colossians], see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. And say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."

Seeing there that he had just mentioned Laodicea and said that he had a ministry, it is assumed that Archippus was the pastor to the Laodicean church at this time. So now we add another person to the list of connections. We had Epaphras over all three of these churches and we now have added Archippus who was the pastor, and perhaps maybe he was the minister to all three of the churches since Epaphras was not there? I do not know, it does not say so specifically, but we may be able to fill in a little of the pieces by thinking that, "Well, they are close, he could probably handle those various churches."

Let us go to back to verse 9. He just mentioned that Paul is sending Tychicus to them. He is probably carrying the letter. And then in verse 9, "with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you all things which are happening here." So he sent Tychicus and Onesimus back to Colossae and he mentions that Onesimus was a citizen.

Well, he had not been a citizen. He had been a slave in Colossae, but he was one of them. He was from that region, from that area. Putting Onesimus in here, let us go to Philemon just to make sure we make all these connections. We will read the first two verses here in Philemon and we will make a few more connections.

Philemon 1-2 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.

So what we find out in this letter to Philemon is that Onesimus was his slave who had run away and found Paul at some point in running away, and Paul had been part of his conversion. And so Onesimus began serving Paul, but there was this problem that he was a runaway slave. So finding out that Onesimus was the slave of Philemon, whom he knew in Colossae, he had written back to Philemon asking him to essentially take Onesimus back and allow him to serve the church. Now, maybe he was freed. He probably was, maybe not, I do not know. It does not tell us what Philemon did. But Onesimus continued to serve the church.

And did you notice we had Archippus here? Archippus was mentioned, and the way it is written, it sounds like since this was a personal letter to Philemon, that probably Apphia was Philemon's wife, and Archippus was Philemon's son. So you have all these connections being made in Colossae and with Hierapolis and with Laodicea and it is just one big happy family. So it gives us maybe a good foundation for saying that there was a lot of interaction going around in these three churches and what happened with one very likely what happened with others. We cannot be totally sure of that, but we can see that the connections were there, the same people were involved, and they were all probably being taught by one man, Archippus, and then those that Paul later sent to him. And Onesimus too was in there, Philemon, you name it. All these people were in the mix.

Let us go back to Colossians and read the first four verses of chapter 2.

Colossians 2:1-4 For I want you to know what a great conflict [the margin says struggle] I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for

as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts maybe encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.

Scholars are in disagreement about whether Paul ever actually visited Colossae or Hierapolis or Laodicea. They do not know for sure. But it is recognized as fact that he had not visited them before writing this epistle. Maybe he got to them later. But at this point in the history of things in Colossae, he had not been there. And so he knew people, but he knew them from afar off. And perhaps people like Philemon, maybe he met him elsewhere in the Empire. I mean, he was a slaveholder. He probably had a good business, maybe traveled a bit. And so he had learned about Philemon and he knew the family history and and all that.

It is possible that he may have passed through the area earlier on his way to somewhere else. But it is most likely that he had not evangelized to any significant degree. Maybe when he came through the area, he had stayed with Philemon, and that is where the friendship had begun. But there is no evidence that he actually did any kind of public preaching there. He just went on to his other destination. But he can truthfully say that he had never seen most of the people there because he had never been part, directly, of their evangelism.

In any case, what we see here in the first verse is that he grouped Colossae and Laodicea together. Like I said before, it was like, to him, they were a single pastorate. And even though they were two different places, he treated them very much the same. I would expect, with his mention of Hierapolis later in the letter, that they were included in this as well. They were close together and so he treated them in the same way.

Verse 4, "This I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words." is probably the main point of the epistle. This is why he was writing them. He had a struggle about this. He was worried for them and he wanted to make sure that these people whom he cared about were not being deceived because there evidently were problems in the area with false teachings of one

kind or another. And he is specifically concerned that some fast talking or smooth talking teacher would come deceive them and undermine their understanding of, as he calls it here, the mystery of God. It is another word, another phrase for the gospel—what Christ had revealed and brought beyond what was in the Old Testament.

It was, we would call it, the gospel of the Kingdom of God. That was all the mystery that Jesus had brought and that "all the mystery" is a lot. He had revealed a great deal and there is a lot to it, but Paul was afraid that somebody was going to come in there and destroy what had been built already to this point.

Now when he says here that he was afraid that they would be deceived with persuasive words, this phrase "persuasive words" indicates plausible arguments. It was not paganism, it was not anything that was too far removed, but they were plausible. They were, you know, "that might be." It is something that is just close enough to the truth that somebody who is not aware would take it *for* truth. They might think that it actually *is* truth. These are things that have what we call "a ring of truth." They sound right. They sound so spiritual, yet they are ultimately false. That they will derail someone, maybe just at a very narrow angle, very acute angle, but it is enough to derail them that by 10, 15, 20 years down the line, they are way off of the main trail. So, by that time, being so far off the main trail, they have probably forsaken God and His way by the time they get to that point. Or maybe it is almost impossible for them to get back because they filled their minds with so much *plausible* truth.

So Paul is worried that the false teachers would bring a gospel that was close enough to what Jesus and the apostles had taught that many of them would not be able to discern the difference. They would then accept it and drift away from the true mystery of God—the truth, the things that Jesus had revealed. Let us, just for fun, take a little gander at II Corinthians 11, because Paul was worried about this in terms of the Corinthians.

II Corinthians 11:3-4 But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a

different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it.

Remember he was writing the young churches here, he was writing to people who had not been in the truth for very long and did not have the walls and barriers against the false teachings that probably they should have. And of course the Corinthians were all messed up as it was anyway with all these other ideas that are floating around the city of Corinth. But he was afraid for them in the same way he was afraid for the Colossians and the Laodiceans, that they would be persuaded by people bringing in something that was of Jesus, but not the *true* Jesus. A gospel, but not really the *true* gospel. A spirit, that was not the Holy Spirit of God. But they were close enough in the way they were presented that people thought, "Yeah, that's probably right. That may be right." And they would allow them to continue. And then, as we use the analogy of the train, they would veer off the main track in time. Slow but steady false teaching that moved them away from the mystery of God, the true mystery of God.

Let us go to II Peter 3 now. We find a problem that Peter was able to recognize even by the mid-sixties here when he wrote II Peter, just before he was about to die. Peter had enough experience with what was going on in the church to see some of these things happening. So he writes here:

II Peter 3:14-18 Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things [meaning the return of Jesus Christ], be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless [doing your job]; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things that are hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

So, the apostle Paul writes the letter to the Colossians to help the church there deal with false teaching. And what he tells them is obviously sound and good and right. It is godly. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit, it is good, he writes nothing wrong. It is righteous teaching, but it is also difficult. It is highbrow, it is high-level theology. It is what the modern scholars call Christology. All about Christ and all the highest thoughts you can have about Christ.

To us, they should not be terribly complex, but the way the apostle Paul puts it, sometimes we do not quite understand it, or maybe it is from Greek to English that we stumble over certain things because we do not know the meanings of words or such. But that is not necessarily the case because Peter was saying that people of his own time, native Greek speakers, were having the same problem with Paul's writings. That they were a little bit too high for them to understand and not being learned or being a little bit unstable, they twist these things, whether in their own minds or these false teachers purposely do, and teach the bad things, try to draw people away from the true church and toward them.

It is just a problem with the writings of Paul because he was assigned by Jesus Christ to give us a lot of this high theology that we could probably not have gotten from other writings within the Bible to that point. And so when you get out of the basics, the fundamentals, and go on to other things, going towards perfection here and trying to learn and understand as much about God as we possibly can, we get into these weeds that Paul is in, trying to explain all the ins and outs of the theology, and we can find ourselves stumbling, not quite understanding. And if we get hooked up with the wrong person, they could lead us totally away from God with some of these things.

So, God approved what Paul has to say in these epistles to put into the canon of the New Testament. So they are truth, they are inspired, they are right. But this does not mean that some deceived and unstable person or a charlatan cannot twist them to say something that Paul never intended. We see it all the time in our studies, as we study for sermons and Bible studies and such. We read the commentaries and we can see the errors there and know that they really do not understand what Paul was getting at and we have to be on guard to those things so we do not pass them along to you and just speak what is true. You too, when you are going through your studies, you need to

be careful when going through Paul, try to get set these things straight in your mind in the truth so you can grow in grace and knowledge of God so that we can avoid being led away by the error of the wicked, as he says here in verse 17.

Now, this advice *definitely* applied to Colossians because, remember, Colossians is high Christology, especially the first two chapters. So this advice from Peter would apply to those in Colossae, in Hierapolis, and in Laodicea, that they needed to be careful about what was written in Colossians and not be drawn away by some slick-talking deceiver who did not understand what he was saying himself, but had come up with something that sounded *plausible* to him and to others who heard him, and end up being drawn away from Christ.

I think this is exactly what happened there in the Lycos Valley where those three churches were. That, as the years went by, remember between the writing of Colossians in the 50s sometime, and the writing of the letters from Jesus Christ in Revelation, is about 40 years, give or take. So over, perhaps, almost two generations of time passes between Paul and John there in Revelation and so there is a good chance for something to go through one of these cycles so that we get from the way it was when Paul wrote these words, to what Jesus saw as the effects of their misunderstanding through the years.

That is what I am thinking here. That there was a process that took place between Paul's writing of Colossians and Jesus' letter to the Laodiceans, ten miles away, that a process occurred in which the truth was broken down into a practice that got Him sick, made Him want to spew them out of His mouth. It only took 40 years, but it was enough to bring the Laodiceans to a point that they were disgusting to God. I mean, that is what happens. You get something in your belly that is disgusting to you, you throw it out, and, Christ, by that time, had pretty much had a belly full and He said, "I'm on the verge here of spewing you out."

As the years went by, the Colossians, the Laodiceans, the Hierapolitans, began to read Paul's instructions to the Colossians and probably Paul's instructions to the Laodiceans (We do not have the letter to the Laodiceans in our Bible and probably the reason is that it was very similar and so why have

two of the same thing. Colossians itself is very similar to Ephesians in many respects. So God did not triple up on that. He just gave us the one to the Colossians to basically tell us what Paul taught those churches.), but over the years they began to read Paul's instructions in a different light, not like the original way that Paul himself was instructing them, the real truth that he was giving them, but in a different light under the influence of local tides of thought. You know how things change over time. People start thinking a little bit differently. New philosophies come in, new ways of looking at things, and new ways to practice what they have learned.

And before the end of the century, the Laodicean church, thinking that they were rich and wealthy and have need of nothing, as Jesus says, spiritually, have instead developed to the point that they were in truth, wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked, and they could not tell that they had descended from being fine from in this place in the 50s or the 60s, to the point where they were in the 90s. They *blind* to it, He says. They did not know that they were so wretched and miserable. But their beliefs and practices had degraded to the point, by the time you get to the 90s and the book of Revelation, that they were disgusting to Christ and that they needed to repent and needed to become reacquainted with their own Savior.

It was a slow descent. It was one of those things that was probably gradual enough that they could not see themselves moving away. But it happened, it happened over time, and we have Jesus' own words to say that they had reached rock bottom.

If this is indeed the case, we need to understand then what the Colossian heresy was, what Paul was writing against, and extrapolate as well as we can how it evolved into the Laodicean condition. And if you look into the commentaries as I did, you will find a wide range of guesses about what the Colossian heresy was about, what Paul was against. But we can find the clues in Colossians 2. So we are going to go back there and try to piece some of this together.

Colossians 2:8 Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:13-23 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh [this was before they were converted], He has made you alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses. [This is the work of Jesus Christ to bring them to conversion. It tells us what He did.], having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross, having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. So let no one judge you in food or in drink [or in eating and drinking], or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance [or the body] is of Christ. [Notice that 'is' in most Bibles, is in italics. It is not in the Greek text.] Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase which is from God. Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourself to regulations—"Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

What we have here is what Christ has done for us and that He has brought us out of a world which has all kinds of these weird teachings, weird philosophies, pagan religions, you name it. There is a lot of stuff out there that is not good. And essentially what he is telling them, from the first part of that in verse 8 all the way to the end, is that these things that are out there that are opposed to the mystery of God—the gospel that we have been taught—have their source in demons. That Satan the Devil and his hordes of demons are out there working against you.

Let me, having said that, explain some of these things that we just went through so you have an understanding of what he is telling the Colossians to watch out for, because they are woven all through this particular chapter.

Let us start with the phrase, the basic principles of the world in verse 8. This is the Greek word *stoicheia*, which means "elemental things, first things, basic things," and it originally referred, in Greek, to the four basic elements: Earth, fire, wind, and water. Those were the basic things. That is what they felt that the whole world was made of, and those are the four powers, if you will. It was also used later on for the Greek alphabet, because are not letters the basic elements of words? And so the meaning fit. It came to mean, after a time as the word changed usages, the basics of anything, the basics of things in general. So the fundamental, rudimentary ideas, rudimentary parts of whatever it is, it was the *stoicheia* of that thing.

At a certain point people began to use this word to refer to the signs of the Zodiac. It came to have a linkage with astrology then and with the linkage to astrology, you had also the certain spirits or the gods that were supposedly represented by the stars in the heavens and the planets wandering about out there in the darkness of space. So, once you get to the time of Paul, then *stoicheia* began to mean those gods or powers, principalities, that were running things, they were the basic elements of the world, basic elements of all things in the philosophy of the time. And so what we would call them today are demons, the ones who posed as gods.

So Paul here, as I mentioned before, is warning that the philosophies and false teachings they were being exposed to in Colossians, Laodicea, and Hierapolis had their sources in demons. It was not Christ. Christ taught them something different. The teachings of Jesus Christ are *radically* different from the teachings of the demons and so we should not be listening to the demonic things. We need to be listening to Christ. That is what I am talking about in terms that this book is highly Christologic, if you will. It is all about Christ and drawing people back to the knowledge of Christ.

Let us go on to the next one. The handwriting of requirements down there in verse 14 has nothing to do with nailing the law to the cross. This is how the modern Protestants have taken this to mean, but it is not there at all. It refers

instead to a self-written certificate of indebtedness. You know what we call self-written certificates of indebtedness these days? An IOU. We write down the things that we have done in our flesh, in the record of history, that are against Christ, that are against His law. And those, Christ came and nailed to the cross, as it were. He forgave and bore away the record of our sinfulness, the record of our sins, and He took it away. It is a wonderful thing that He did. We wrote all those tickets against ourselves and He came and removed our guilt by His sacrifice on the cross.

Paul goes on to say that by His sinless sacrifice and His subsequent resurrection to glory and eternal life, that Christ proved Himself superior to these basic elements of the world. He is preeminent. He defeated Satan and his demons. They are nothing. Their philosophies are nothing. All their teachings are nothing. Everything that they do is nothing—because Christ's won, Christ proved that He is the Son of God, that He is very God. Then He began His church and He taught these people. And the Father called those others to Him and He has been building His church, and in doing so, doing all of these things, He has proven Himself that He is greater than demonic powers.

And it says here in verse 15, by doing all that He made a public spectacle of them, meaning the demons, the principalities, and powers, triumphing over them in it. So, Christ has already proven that He is the great fullness of the Godhead bodily, as is mentioned in verse 9. That is our proof our sins have been forgiven and now we look to Christ for everything. So Paul warns them not to let outsiders judge them about eating or drinking or keeping the feast or a Sabbath, because these we do because they are symbols. They are types of future things. They are things that we can learn from; they are symbolic acts that we go through so that we can learn more and more about God and His way, and eventually come to understand what God is doing, what God's plan is (that is obvious in the holy days), and those are things that God uses to teach us along the way to become like His Son.

He sets aside the Sabbath for us so that we have one day of the week that we could totally immerse ourselves in God's way and hear things like the sermons and sermonettes and other things so that we can learn and grow. He gives us the holy days every year to reenact the plan of God so that we understand what is going on. He tells us not to eat pork for other lessons. He

tells us to take, in terms of drinking, we have to drink His blood once a year on the Passover for another reason, another symbolic reason. But it is big theology that we need to grasp about Jesus Christ and His covenant, so many other things.

So Paul says, "do not let anybody judge you" when you do these things because they are good for you. You should not feel bad about doing them because Christ in you is bringing you into His image through these symbolic things, these types. They may be shadows of things to come, but we need to go through the shadows to reach the bright light—the light of His way.

This has nothing to do with doing away with the law. In fact, it is actually supporting some of the things in the law because they are necessary for our growth.

He also says, do not let anybody judge you, but the church of God. It is the church that should be the standard. The church is the pillar and ground of truth. The church is the one that judges you on these matters, is what he is saying here. You do not look toward the world to tell you how these matters should go. You look toward the church and what the church is doing and what the church is teaching through the inspiration of Jesus Christ—not the world, not these pagan philosophies, not these things that are from demons. That is dumb. Let the church guide you.

Let us go on to the next one. False humility down in verse 18. It probably refers to unnecessary spiritual practices like rigorous fasting and other denials of the flesh that made a person seem humble at first glance, but all they really were doing was displaying them to flaunt their spiritual superiority as they saw it in their own mind. This is his first salvo against asceticism, fasting, of denying the flesh one way or another.

Beyond verse 18, he gets into it quite a bit more, handle not, taste not, touch not, what have you. He is telling them that these things may look wise, they may look spiritual, but they are, in the end, worthless exercises. You might as well not even do them if they are not really helping you. He even says that they really do not do anything to control the fleshly appetites, and in fact, denials of the flesh can often make you go to the other extreme. He mentions this in terms of marriage in I Corinthians 7:5, he says, "Don't stop doing your

sexual relations with your husband or wife but if you do, do it only for a time, because you may lack self-control and do something that you shouldn't have done." It is the same idea here.

Let us go on to worship of angels. It is there in verse 18 again. This is probably *Jewish mysticism* in which angels supposedly guarded or controlled a person's spiritual progression toward God. And in the way that they looked at it at the time, you had to know certain passwords, you had to recite certain things or know the angel's name, or whatever it was, as a way to get beyond it to the next level; this particular angel, and it was a demon, not an angel. These angels, depending on the system, had to be appeased with certain things, you had to go along and do something so you would reach the next level. (sounds like a lot of video games.)

But what happened was, eventually it evolved into what is called Gnosticism. That you had to have certain knowledge to be able to progress up into whatever, 32nd level of this or that, so that you would be accounted spiritual. And as he mentions there at the end of verse 18, this probably involved seeking certain visions of esoteric knowledge (gnosis), and probably also experiences within the group that go well far beyond what is written in God's Word. Baptisms in animal blood or just strange things that the mind of man, inspired by demons, could come up with to make a person feel like he has moved along in his spirituality.

Scholars try to link all these disparate things together, all these different beliefs—the philosophy, the basic principles, the Jewish mysticism, the asceticism—and they try to look back in history and say Paul was arguing against this X religion or X philosophy, and you know what? They have come up with a blank. There is nothing that fits these particular clues that we found here. They come up empty. All they have, then, are guesses that they put in their commentaries, nothing matches these clues altogether.

Now, why is that? It is a simple answer. Paul is not arguing against a single thing, he is arguing against something far broader. He is arguing against an attitude, against societal trends, against a zeitgeist, if you will, a world view, rather than a particular heresy or philosophy. He was not just teaching against Gnosticism, incipient Gnosticism, he was not teaching just against astrology or Greek philosophy or paganism or even Jewish mysticism per se.

It was all of these things and more. His main point, as I mentioned already, is that Satan and the demons—the enemy—is behind all of these things. It does not matter what it is. It could be anything in your local community that strays from the truth of Christ, Satan could use any of those things to get you to step off the trail.

He is saying, they are all around you, they are all in all kinds of different things within society and you have got to be on guard against all of them. What Satan and his demons are trying to do is to use these new ideas, philosophies, what have you, to distract us from the preeminent fullness of Christ. Trying to take their crown. The demons are trying to rip that crown off your head! That is what Jesus Christ warned the Philadelphians about. "Don't let anyone take your crown. You're doing great, but watch out!" The demons are out there and their unwitting assistants in the world.

Let us go to verse 6 of Colossians 2.

Colossians 2:6-10 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead [or the divine nature] bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

You do not need anything else. You do not need this philosophy or that philosophy or this practice or that practice. If it does not come from Christ Himself, you do not need those things. So Paul's primary positive teaching that he wanted to get across to the Colossians and then to the Laodiceans and Hierapolitans, is that Christ is *everything* to us. We have received Christ through God's Spirit given to us with the laying on of hands. We have received and believed His message, His truth through the gospel. We have grown in knowledge, understanding, and wisdom as we have been taught the truth through His Word, through what He has left to us. We are intimately connected to Him and we should not let anything come between us—because, spiritually, without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5).

Our job, put simply by Paul here, is to walk in Him. That is, live as He lived. You can refer to I John 2:6 here, "We ought to walk just as He walked." As he writes in I Corinthians 11:1, "Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ." Christ is our source. He is our example. He is our goal. He is *everything* to us and walking in Christ is an all-encompassing lifestyle. He describes it in Colossians 3:3-4, "For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you will also appear with Him in glory." It goes all the way to the very end. We are covered with Christ. We walk with Him surrounding us and in us. We are totally, intimately, entwined with Jesus Christ and that is how we go through life—how we should go through life—and let nothing else get in the way. When we commit to Him, we are absorbed into Him, and He becomes our life.

I was going to go through John 14:19-23 and John 17:20-23, but that is where Jesus tells us during that Passover service, "I in you and you in Me. . ." You know what I am talking about. The Father would dwell in them and they would be one. That is what He is talking about. Are you aware that this is always how it has been? Let us go back to Deuteronomy the 30th chapter.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20 "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give them."

Way, way back in the book of Deuteronomy, he was telling us that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is our *everything*.

So Paul, after telling them this in chapter 3, is telling them what we must do. I will not go through Colossians 3:5-17, but it is very easy to summarize. He tells them to mortify their flesh, that is, get rid of the fleshly things that are holding them back. He says put them to death, get rid of them, and then he tells them to put on the new man and put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, mercies, longsuffering, etcetera. Put on all those good

things so that you look like Jesus Christ as much as possible. And that is what you do. Once you figure out how important Christ is, how high your Christology should be, then you follow it up with works. You follow it up with getting rid of the bad things, putting on the good things, making sure that your character is as similar as possible to your Savior's.

What we have is that godly Christianity plainly demands moral rehabilitation and growth. The obvious outgrowth of the high Christology of the gospel message is moral rectitude and improvement. It should prod us, knowing how great Christ is and what He has done for us and how He lives in us, to get rid of everything that is *not* godly and put on everything that *is* godly. That should be our motivation. There is no way to be like Christ without going through the motions, going through the effort (more than motions, the effort) of getting rid of sin and putting on righteousness.

I recently watched a video by one Eric Redmond. He is a senior pastor at Redeemer Fellowship Church in Boston, and he was answering the question: Must a preacher share the gospel in every sermon? His answer is an unequivocal yes. But understand, to Protestants the gospel is the message *about* Christ, what He did and how we can be saved. You know, there is always seems to be an altar call, but it is not, necessarily, that He came preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God. We have gotten that from Mark 1, where it says that Jesus came and preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God, and so that is what we believe the gospel to be. When you say it that way, it is much broader in scope. It gives us a goal and it gives us a whole slew of things that we need to do to get there.

So Redmond's argument, confidently stated with scriptural references, is that it is far better to preach Christ than to preach about moral imperatives. And he actually uses those words. He says that it is better to preach about Christ than God's character requirements, because in his estimation, that sort of preaching, preaching moral imperatives, reduces the Christian message to moralism and sermons to mere self-help talks, like a TED talk. It was plain that he believes Christ is everything. That came through in the video. But morality or Christian growth into the image of Christ is, to him, an afterthought. It is non-essential, it is a lesser part of the gospel. Actually, he even made a statement that could be construed as that it is a distraction.

Now, a person can come to this conclusion if he reads Colossians 1 and 2, which are highly theological, highly Christological, and then ignores chapters 3 and 4. The first half of Colossians is doctrinal, emphasizing the preeminence of Christ, all the fullness of the divine nature bodily. The second half is practical Christian living with all the moral imperatives: mortify the flesh, put off anger, do not lie, put on tender mercies, put on the bond of perfection, love, wives submit, men love your wives, that sort of thing. Putting the two together is a balance. Taking one without the other is an imbalance and an overemphasis.

This bifurcation of the book, where the moral imperatives are essentially thrown out, is a fundamental part of Protestant doctrine and practice. The major doctrine in Protestantism is known as eternal security. We also know it as once saved, always saved. And the practice is that we are saved by grace alone and all works are classed as attempts to earn salvation. It is, "take me as I am Lord," with little or no change in morality, no real repentance, no keeping of the commandments, or maybe they are optional, and the law is a curse. That is what they teach. That is what they practice.

As I alluded to in my last sermon, I believe the Laodiceans' problem is equivalent to no-works Protestantism, just with a few different wrinkles. And this is why Christ was disgusted by their works. "I know your works and they turn My stomach!" Because they were lacking in them, first, and the ones that they did, they did lethargically without any zeal and with no real understanding of what it was about and how it pleased Him and the Father that we do these things and grow.

So my sense of what happened with the Laodiceans is this: They took Paul's instruction to the Colossians very seriously. Their letter was likely very similar, as I mentioned before, to the Colossians' letter, but especially his exhortations about Christ's preeminence and how much He has done for us. So they swore off all the extra works that He had mentioned in chapter 2 that they should not be doing. They swore off the aestheticism, they swore off listening to demons and the philosophies. They swore off the Jewish mysticism. They swore off all the things that they should have and that was good. That was that early generation.

But then, over the years, they began eliminating a good many of the *godly* works that they should have been doing, those that are in chapters 3 and 4, and the ones that they retained, they practiced with little or no zeal or fervor for God, no real love for Christ. Combine that with external pressures to succeed in a wealthy and prosperous city like Laodicea, and their relationship with Christ withered on the vine. It slipped far down their list of priorities, their relationship with Him. But they believed they were just fine, even spiritually rich and lacking in nothing, because they had convinced themselves that Christ had done it all for them and they were assured, the blessed assurance, of being in the Kingdom of God, no matter what.

This is essentially the attitude of this age in this United States of America, in Canada, in England, and all across Europe. And we are so very susceptible to it. It can be alluring because people who practice it have it so easy. All they have to do is come before the altar, say they believe Christ, maybe get baptized, maybe get a little water sprinkled on them. They hardly have to do anything and after that they do not have to do anything. They do not have to repent, they do not have to overcome, they do not have to grow or produce fruit. There is no striving, no struggle, no guilt, no feelings of inadequacy, no feelings of unworthiness before God. There is nothing. They do not have to do anything. They can just live as they please.

But there is a godly purpose in our struggles, in our efforts to please God. Let us finish in II Corinthians 4.

II Corinthians 4:16-18 [Paul writes to them] Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen, for the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

II Corinthians 5:9-11 Therefore, we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may

receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad [you are going to be judged by what you have done]. Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men [to do these things, to hear the gospel and to do what the gospel requires]; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences.

So what is the point? Look to Christ for all things, and be glad and thankful that He has called you and given you so much, and you have learned all these things in Him. And, keep up the good work.