

Paul at His Best; Living Spiritual Truths

Lesson Series for the Study of Statements by Paul the Apostle as found in the books of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians

To the Teacher: This lesson series is intended to focus on Paul's letters to the churches named above, and probably to other churches, making particularly Colossians an encyclical as it is presented to several Asian churches—most of which Paul never visited or pastored. However, it seems he had a very accurate network of friends and colleagues who fully informed him of the progress and challenges of the various congregations.

Admittedly, the selection of passages from the four books is entirely arbitrary. I tried to pull out of the 26 total chapters those passages with which most Christians (of several years' duration) might be familiar. In addition, other verses that set forth distinct principles favored by Paul have been highlighted. As the teacher, you are invited to carefully read and analyze each of the four letters and select any verses or topics you believe will best represent Pauline theology and be helpful to your classes in their maturity in Christ; i.e., the verses I have chosen is not intended to limit what you may choose to teach.

Because there are four epistles on which we are focusing, there are four lessons presented. Your teaching assignment is likely eight weeks in duration. My suggestion is that each of the four lessons be taught in two sessions—not rushing through all of the scriptures in one session, but taking time to be deliberate and clear in helping the class fully understand the import and application of each verse. Perhaps saving half of the scriptures for the second session is the easiest technique, but you may desire to do it some other way. (In case you "use up" these materials and have a Sunday left in your assignment, Philemon is another letter by Paul that you could tag onto the series.) Of course, Romans and Corinthians were also written by Paul—but they are for another day.

There is attached to the first lesson a summary of Jewish history and a clear statement of the several tradition-shattering lessons that Paul encountered as the Lord gave him utterance. Please take time to review the summary; it will enlighten your understanding of the challenges Paul faced in leading churches of Gentiles who had little or no knowledge or experience with anything Jewish. He was creating theology out of whole cloth—the leading edge in global expansion of the gospel story he told to all peoples—not just Israel.

If you think the issues facing Christianity in the USA today are challenging, imagine the angst that Jewish leaders who lived and died in the dogma of Judaism must have faced when presented with the fact that God's embrace included the whole world. Customs and rigid rules were totally cast aside as even the heathen Gentiles "sat at table with the Jews" on equal footing with them, but without circumcision or allegiance to the Temple and its precepts. Those were tumultuous times and Paul was the instigator of most of the changes necessary to move to the new understanding of God's economy.

One use of the materials in the summary would be to selectively, as it fit the verse being studied, interject ideas and challenges mentioned in the summary—in effect, feeding the summary into the whole series, one spoonful at a time. As a matter of fact, that technique would help "cure" one difficulty of this series; *i.e.*, it has no plot, no story, no players, no miracles, no parables—primarily the very best (and first) teachings on theology. That can be very dry, but with ideas from the summary interjected to point out how radical some of Paul's ideas were, substance and life can be wrapped around the teachings.

The other suggestion would be to design open ended questions based on the topics of the verses that open or transition your lesson. Invite (and wait for) responses to the dilemmas you may pose; ask for testimonies about the subject matter and get the class to open up in ways that will draw them into the lesson.

I have chosen for most of the verses the New Century Version (NCV) of the Bible. My intent is to step slightly away from the traditional statement found in the KJV or the RSV because sometimes we almost blithely quote the slightly archaic language but fail to really understand the detail meaning of what we just said. For your benefit, you might use biblegateway.com as a resource in terms of comparing a verse in multiple translations. There is one application on that website that permits up to four side-by-side versions of any particular quotation. Find it and "play" the NCV against several other translations to see the variety of ways in which the lesson may be stated.

Pivotal in teaching this series is to recognize Paul's intention in virtually everything he says is to bring everyone and every teaching back to Christ and His presence within the believer. A necessary tool for any reader to accomplish Paul's purpose is to manage his mind—his thought life—focused on the reality of Christ as the crucified and risen Son of God. Time and again he mentions the role of one's mind and the necessity to control it.

Do not be discouraged that some of the topics appear more than once—perhaps in two or more of the letters. Teach each as if it were the only one; don't be of the mind that the class members will actually remember you taught this same idea from another of the epistles two weeks ago. (They may not even remember who Paul is.) They say that a person must hear the same idea three or four times before it really sticks in their mind. Telling the "old, old story" time and time again is a delightful way to lead folks through these important concepts. If Paul said it over and over, we can too.

For your use in whatever way helps your teaching style, there are appended to each lesson pages on which are printed just the scriptures—in the order set forth in the lesson (and in the epistle itself). You can copy these scriptures (set in 20-point type) onto a transparency and use an overhead projector; you can copy them into a Power Point lesson; you can reproduce them in hard copy for the classes to retain. In the event you want to reproduce them, you may want to adjust the type from 20 point to 12 or 14 point to save a few trees. (The material is furnished—for uploading—in Word format; whether that format survives the upload and download, I can't promise.)

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My suggestion would be to use parts of the Summary in each of the lessons—as might fit with your presentation of the specific lessons. The history and background for all four books is the same—but it is quite a complicated and highly important (almost) plot that you can unveil step by step as you encounter the special verses that stand out as beacons of Pauls' ministry—uniting all Christians in Christ.

Seventeen out of "100 Bible verses everyone should know by heart" are found in these four epistles, although the four letters combine to fill 32 pages out of 1889 pages for the whole Bible —1.7% -- and only twenty chapters altogether. Paul's truths are compact and highly instructive for the Christian life.

Bene' Note: *The materials in each of the four books are presented for the whole book in one "lesson" that is intended to be taught in two succeeding sessions. Plan to save several of the memorable **statements** for the second lesson in each book—making sure that the context and "flow" of the first lesson is also mentioned in the second. You decide how far to go with the first lesson.*

Galatians

Writing to the churches in Galatia (where Paul ministered in earlier times), Paul opens his epistle with a frequently used phrase "Grace to you and peace from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age . . ." (2 Cor 4:4 elaborates: "The god of this world has blinded unbelievers to keep them from seeing Christ." Isn't that where we are today?)

No Other Gospel

One description of Paul's dismay and urgency: "He writes in the white heat of an emotion compounded of sorrow, astonishment, and indignation, as he contemplates the possible defection of his beloved Galatians. His astonishment at the attitude of the Galatian converts runs through the whole letter, while his deep love is expressed in tender terms. His emotion is caused by his conviction that his readers were running the risk of deserting the gospel, defecting from Christ, and falling away from grace. This was no trifling question of doctrinal hairsplitting; it was a matter of life and death."

He quickly turns to a defense of the gospel he has preached and calls "accursed" (*anathema* = *excommunication*) anyone that would proclaim a gospel contrary to the one he had previously presented – even if angels from heaven should proclaim such a contrary gospel. (*In Rom 16:17 he advises any who deviate in their teaching in this manner are to be avoided.*)

Paul defends his apostleship by proclaiming "that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

He describes his earlier life in Judaism as a persecutor of the Church of God, actively trying to destroy it. He was a leader among the Jews because he was "far more zealous for the traditions of his ancestors," but then he briefly references his Damascus Road experience and the study he began immediately afterwards, mentioning that he "did not go to Jerusalem" but went away at once into Arabia and "after three years he did go to Jerusalem to visit with Cephas [whom we know as Peter], and stayed with him." "I did not see other apostles at that time.

After other trips and a period of 14 years "I went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas and taking Titus along with me in response to a revelation." That revelation provided the principal direction of his remaining life; namely, he was to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, a Jew, among the Gentiles.

As a result of his conference with the church leaders in Jerusalem, he reports "they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they (Peter and his Jewish Christian leaders) should go to the circumcised Jews." (*Acts 15 details the Council and its decision.*)

In summary, Paul (though a Jewish leader and hater of Christians initially) was converted, called, changed, convinced, confirmed (not corrected) and caused credit to be given to God. A true apostle, having communed directly with the Lord on the Damascus road.

Life in Christ is by Faith, Not Works of the Law

Our first familiar pronouncement from Paul comes immediately as Paul makes this declaration that is the foundation of our eternal life. It has been called the Magna Carta of Christian liberty; we are no longer slaves to the ineffective Jewish laws.

Galatians 2:16 and 3:11

" . . . we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law."

"Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith'"

When one recognizes that virtually all of the principal tenets of our Christian belief are in fact mysteries that we cannot explain and must accept by faith, it is important to understand how that faith is formed, and in what/whom we have faith. From a listing of Christian mysteries that must be received by faith, this particular this statement focuses on the means by which we accept the saving acts of Jesus Christ as the means of being made right with God. It is foundational as an experience necessary to become a Christ follower. The result of exercising that faith is to have Christ live in you by means of his Holy Spirit solely because "[He] loved me and gave himself for me."

[Discussion--Identify and explain "mysteries of Christian belief": God, virgin birth, Jesus as Man-God efficacy of His death to expunge our sins; infilling of Holy Spirit at conversion, etc., etc.]

[Discussion here appropriate on the historic Jewish method of gaining right standing with God i.e., by following the law and the regulations issued pursuant to them, as opposed to the new covenant provision that salvation (right standing with God) comes by faith in Jesus' sacrifice and not by works of the law.]

Paul pursues this in chapter 3 by asking the Galatians "Who has bewitched you?" "Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish, having started with the spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?"

This is a challenge to Christians today who have experienced a genuine salvation and conversion encounter with Jesus, and yet how easy it is to switch one's focus to doing "the right thing" from time to time as a means of furthering one's hope for salvation.

Christ Lives in Me

Turning quickly in his epistle to the means by which faith conduct may be properly implemented Paul points out the power source necessary to accomplish a life of faith.

Galatians 2:20

" . . . it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Here we find the immediate consequence of one's becoming a Christian, as well as the means by which (the power source) the walk of faith can be practically pursued: the indwelling holy spirit leading to what is frequently known as the Spirit-filled life.

[Discussion here on the means of receiving and continually surrendering and following the Holy Spirit bestowed on us at our salvation.]

Paul adds a historical note (perhaps for the benefit of Gentile readers) that quickly recites God's promises made to Abraham and to his offspring. Then later (430 years) God gave the law (Ten Commandments) to his people through Moses. Then he poses the question: "why then the law? It was added because of transgressions." Then he explains that the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. Paul's next declaration, known well to us, promises freedom, absence of discrimination, and unity.

Divisions Abolished for Those in Christ

Galatians 3:27 – 29; 4:28 and 5:6

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

"Now we, my friends, are children of the promise."

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

This is, as is currently being discussed, "democratization" of the highest order. It is our statement of entitlement to share in the blessings of God originally promised primarily to the Jewish nation; further it was, in its time, heretical to declare that slavery and male sexual superiority are not differentiating factors in the kingdom of God. However, he was convinced that ". . . all of you are one in Christ Jesus" and equally "heirs according to the promise."

[Other worldwide trends: "Six Ds of Exponentials: digitization, deception, disruption, demonetization, dematerialization, and democratization." The world is changing before our eyes and frequently, we don't even know it is happening.]

[Need for discussion questions and emphasis on the meaning of these statements in today's world, especially in the Christian Church world.]

Apparently Paul had received information that the favor he earlier enjoyed with the Galatians and the passion he felt for their future understanding of the gospel had been maligned, discredited, and disregarded, because he begins Chapter 4 with a fervent request to "not turn back to the old ways when they did not know God and were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods."

You can almost feel the angst in Paul's perception of what has happened since he left Galatia as he asks "what has become of the goodwill you felt? Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?" He later poses, "I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, I am perplexed about you." All of this is troubling to Paul because his purest intention was that he again was "in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you."

One of the foremost challenges for Paul in going to the Gentiles was to enable their understanding of the single God, and not be "enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods." Monotheism, as opposed to a belief in plural gods, was an essential bridge to the ultimate declaration that there is only one way to be made right before God and that is by

accepting his Son in faith as a means of righting the record we otherwise might face. Most of the world today is (at the least) unsure, if not in total rejection, of the idea that there is a God, creator and sustainer of all.

[Further discussion of this point.]

The Two Loves of a Christian

Galatians 5:13-14

"for the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ' . . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

[Discussion of two-fold admonition—love yourself and love your neighbor.]

Works of the Flesh and Fruit of the Spirit

One of the most widely known of Paul's statements concerns the "fruit of the Spirit." However, it is preceded by a graphic description of the "works of the flesh." Let's read both:

Galatians 5:16-25

"Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another."

[Discussion questions re perception and application of works (flesh) and fruit (spirit).]

Payday at last!

Galatians 6:6

"Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher."

Sowing and Reaping

Finally (for this book), Paul asks his readers to take the long view and to be totally aware of the eternal record-keeping that one day we must face the record we have made.

Galatians 6:7–10

"Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith."

Paul closes his letter with his personal statement: "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world... A new creation is everything"

[Need for discussion questions and emphasis on the meaning of these statements in today's world, especially in the Christian Church world.]

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Ephesians

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Background of Ephesians. In bible times, Ephesus was the chief metropolis of Asia (Turkey today) with its crossroads and international travel. Today it is virtually abandoned and desolate; originally, it was the home of the Goddess Artemis, to whom much worship was presented as one of the Grecian gods so served.

Ephesians is written in two parts: Chapters 1-3 and 4-6. The first part is the "revelation of doctrine" as Paul conceived and declared it for an emerging church—25 or 30 years in the making, but struggling to understand things theologically. The second part is "development of practice"—Paul's attempt to apply his doctrine to everyday events challenging the converts and their leaders. Some of the application passages are as important as any of their kind in the New Testament. One ought not treat either of the two topics isolated from the other

"Doctrine runs into practice in the mind of the Apostles, and practice always feels its footing in doctrine. Let the suggestion given us by this fact never be forgotten by the Christian teacher. Does he really mean to be a messenger of the Gospel? Then let him often remind himself of this double phenomenon of the Good Tidings—that its end is 'our sanctification' (1 Thess iv.3), in the most practical sense possible, and that it seeks that end through the supernatural means of the message of Christ for us and Christ in us. Sometimes we forget that practical holiness, conformity to God's will in real life, and not only security and spiritual enjoyment, is its aim." (H.C.G. Moule, D.D.)

This letter has been lauded as "one of the divinest compositions of man," "the Bach of the Bible," "the Switzerland of the New Testament," and "the crown and climax of Pauline theology." It was intended to be a circular letter, read to the Asian churches where Paul had worked for three years on his third missionary tour (Acts 19:1--20:20).

Different from Galatians, it is written in calm, deliberate fashion, dwelling profoundly upon the person of Christ, and the church, the household of God, of which Christ is the

cornerstone. The church is the body of Christ, who is its head, and all believers are members of his body.

Along with an exalted view of the church goes an equally high view of the unity of the faith, the greatness of God's plan of redemption and his ultimate purpose to sum up all of creation in Christ. Unlike anything else in the New Testament, the apostle speaks of the heavenly places as the realm of redemption.

But, in spite of such lofty theological affirmations, the apostle bases his practical exhortations to Christians in their daily lives, in relation to each other, to the world, and in the family.

The letter is devoid of personal references to Paul's life or frustrations with the church (as he was with the Galatian church); there are no rebukes, no parables, or plot; there are no living characters mentioned. It is pure Paul teaching and reminding the churches to whom the letter was delivered of the Lord's plan: *"through the church, to unite all of creation in Christ."* Look for the evidences of Christ's role in gathering all things in Him, the goal of unity of the faith with all persons being a part of it, and the earthly conduct of the redeemed, who, together, are the church and collectively and separately possessed of the promised Holy Spirit.

Spiritual Blessings in Christ—Chosen by Him

(Why Are We Here?)

Ephesians 1:3--8a

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us."

Emphasize:

- v3 God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.
- v4 he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless
- v5 He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ
- v6 he freely bestowed grace on us in the Beloved
- v7 we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses
- v8 he lavished the riches of his grace on us.

From this passage we take great comfort that God has a plan for the universe and for all persons, having chosen to make us a part of his family by adoption as children; our opportunity to join him was not chance or a mistake; nor was it our plan, purpose or within our capability to make it happen—it was all his plan and purpose and his action in our direction.

Our part is to recognize the cost of the redemption/blessing we have received; *i.e.*, "through his blood," and return the proper worship and praise of that grace, so freely given. (1:6) More than that, it is here declared that this plan and His actions in pursuit of it were "according to the good pleasure of his will". He wanted to do it and it gave Him great pleasure.

[Dwell on the depth of this bold, foremost declaration of Paul's life ministry purpose and our (sometimes) poor awareness of the purpose and magnitude of our precious gift (His blood). Don't leave the topic until all are aware of the great cost of their salvation and the glory of having received from Christ "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."]

Mystery of God's Will

Ephesians 1:8b--10

"With all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

The key phrases here are "the mystery of his will" and "a plan for the fullness of time." The overriding purpose of all the planning—even if somewhat mysterious to us earthlings— is "to gather up all things in heaven and earth in Christ." The purpose of God's benevolence toward us is not to make us nice persons; it is to make us **new** persons in the image of Christ, joyously following Him with all our life's thoughts, energy and activity.

For those who ponder questions like "What am I here for?" "What is my purpose?" "Does God really know who I am or care?" this passage holds answers at the highest level. Like a powerful magnet, God's will is that all persons will be drawn to Christ and find their fulfillment in Him. A further aspect of such a plan is that as we are all drawn to Christ, by definition, that means we are drawn together. Unity, as we will see, is a major part of the Plan.

Our Inheritance—The Promised Holy Spirit

Ephesians 1:11a and 13

"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance . . . so that we . . . might live for the praise of his glory."

"You. . . were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people"

Finally, summing up his opening salvo, Paul affirms our ultimate inheritance (and its purpose) and declares that universally we have all received the "promised Holy Spirit" with all his gifts and powers. Aren't you glad you, as God's adopted child, have assurance of life purpose, complete with the Spirit's gifts and powers, and, ultimately, your own divine inheritance?

We are not in life's game by accident and without purpose and power to achieve. We have been called, adopted, equipped and sent forth to praise God and his Son, on a mission to bring others into the kingdom and share his great love. We can be confident of our calling, as we employ our equipping.

On a physical level, a commonly asked question when one has received a gift, as, for example, an inheritance from a relative—alive or deceased—is to ask "What am I supposed to do with this?" Just using such bounty to pay off one's past debts seems likely to be beneath the life purpose of the donor, who may have lived a conservative lifestyle in order to accumulate property to left to his heirs.

As in the case of verse 12, ("so that") or ("destined and appointed") when we are presented with new resources that are accompanied with "instructions for use" of such bounty, following the instructions just might be appropriate—and be pleasing to the donor.

[Teachers: How often we are privileged to be donors to others of possessions under our control; usually the gift is intended for a purpose. If that use instruction is clearly told, how rude and inconsiderate is it to divert the gift to other purposes and avoid compliance with the guidance. Explore with the class times when they have been on one side or the other of such transactions.]

Paul's prayer (1:15-23) reiterates the declarations he has made in the early part of Chapter 1 about God's plan and its application to us; about the cost of our redemption, "the hope to which he has called you" and "what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints." It is a prayer we might each paraphrase for our own lives.

Stated differently, the apostle is prayerful that the letter's Gentile recipients will realize and actualize God's enabling power made manifest in Christ and Christ's church. Paul wants them to recognize that the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in and among them.

[To the Teacher: The scriptural high declarations and emotive phrases are set forth in this lesson series—unless otherwise designated—from the NCV "New Century version." They and the usual (KJV, RSV, NIV, and their update translations) are capable of confusing and sublimating the true more easily understood depth of meaning as written in more modern translations such as MSG, Phillips, AMP and TLB (copies attached). It is highly recommended for your study and understanding and, perhaps for exhibition to your class, that you use one or more of them also. They will give vibrancy and expanded understanding more than more formal translations. Frankly, the difference in this particular chapter between the translations is greater than usually exists. Great help in "humanizing the scriptures," without breaking faith with the true meaning. can be gained by considering the work of several authors.]

Salvation by God's Grace Through Faith

Paul's next memorable declaration—truly a distinguishing criterion from his historic Jewish beliefs--was to be the foundation of his ministry.

Ephesians 2:8--10

" . . . by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that on one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

This blockbuster statement is the ultimate "break" from strict Judaism and sets forth the soon-to-be-recognized-as-universal-proclamation of the sole means by which one is made right with God. No longer is it possible or necessary to rely on one's works, no matter how good they are, as a means of being made right with our Creator.

It was not intended to be a mandate to ignore all of Israel's centuries of prior worship and reliance on how God wanted his people to act, but instead it is moving beyond mere physical obedience to the point of intellectual assent and spiritual acceptance of the two facts that mark the Christian experience: repentance being acknowledged as a turning from a life course that is proved inadequate, and acceptance of the sacrifice of Christ as being the only way to truly meet God and join him.

[Enumerate what changes occur if Paul's plan of salvation is accepted from what was previously required by Jewish rules and beliefs about how man related to God.]

A careful understanding of "salvation by grace through faith alone" requires knowledge of the gospel and assent to it; that is, one is intellectually convinced that the gospel message is true. Then personal appropriation of Christ and his promises and requirements by knowing and assenting to the truth to the gospel truth as a means of receiving the Lord Jesus as his own is possible.

It is not sufficient to simply believe there is a God, or to hear his plan for reuniting sinful man with himself; nor is it sufficient to believe that there was a Son of God named Jesus who died and was raised from the dead, unless one also (after repenting from past attempts at living the right life) accepts Jesus as both Savior and Lord of the days ahead.

Although believers are saved through faith alone, saving faith is always attested by good works – because faith is alive, it always finds expression through those works of righteousness which are its proper fruit. Definition: "Biblical faith" is a belief in the truth simply because God says so; there is no other proof.

[Teachers: This is the opportunity, even with classes of mature church members/ Christians, to enable them to affirm their own understanding, experience, and commitment to Christ as the essential ingredient for the eternity they so fondly expect. It is entirely possible to mingle with Christians, hear and adopt their language and customs, be appropriate in dress, manners, and participation with such folk, and still not ever have made repentance/acceptance a reality in one's own life.]

[(This was one of C. S. Lewis's deep concerns—his Screwtape Letters repeatedly highlight one's ability to mimic the truth in one's conduct, but miss the essential commitment--as evidenced by one's conduct). One

of the tests for the degree to which one has fully entered in to the kingdom, is the self-examination of whether the appropriate lifestyle of "good works" can be seen from an examination of one's activities, use of time and money, and at least be able to see glimpses of the love of Christ flowing out from one's life.]

One In Christ

Paul's next blockbuster is to awaken his audience to a revolutionary thought: God not only loves "His people, the Jews," but he invites all persons, even including the Gentiles, to join in building together a spiritual dwelling place for God—in their lives too. Imagine how this changes everything. It might be likened to learning that you are not the only child of your parents—there are brothers and sisters—cousins, etc. that are also part of your family. And you never thought you would have to share with such strangers the resources of your (supposed) family.

Ephesians 2: 11--13, 19--22; 3:4b--6

". . . you Gentiles by birth . . . were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you . . . are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

". . . the mystery of Christ [which] was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

Paul goes on to declare that ***"this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things."***

I wonder if the "establishment's" thoughts about Paul's statement might be something like some Americans have felt about the influx of immigrants into our country. *"They don't belong here; we can't support them; they will take our jobs; they will vote the wrong way; we are Americans, they aren't."* For the "dyed in the wool" Jew, the thought that God had always said "These (Jews) are my people and I will be their God" precluded anyone else from having His favor, like they enjoyed.

But, as we know, the expansion of possible members of God's family was not the result of Jewish misbehavior or God changing his mind; it was announced to Abram when he

was called forth to go to the land of God's choice, that "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." (Gen 12:3)

Direct Access to God

Having superseded the Jewish law as required by God to be rightly related to him, and having expanded the realm of nations capable of joining God's family from Israel alone to the whole wide world ("www"), Paul next sets aside the religious hierarchy in favor of direct access to God himself. Never before has it been thought possible or appropriate for even a devout follower to be able to be directly related to God without intermediaries. Paul elsewhere will refer to all as "a nation of priests," etc. meaning each of us has the opportunity for communion directly with Jesus and his Father. Unheard of!

Ephesians 3:11--12

" . . . The eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him."

This was truly a blockbuster for a Pharisee to declare that all members of Christ's body—Jew and Gentile alike—have direct access to God and that no human intermediary (priest, for example) was necessary for man to commune with God. What a glorious privilege and fond expectation that God is approachable. On occasion we can also expect that He will exercise the privilege of speaking directly to us also.

The writer of Hebrews puts it this way (4:16): *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*

Knowing the Love of Christ

If "God is love," and if we are directed (building on all that Christ has done for us and through us) "to *know the love of Christ*," such love, being the very nature of God, must be the most important thing about God and Jesus we are to learn, experience and proclaim. But what is it—this "love"?

Ephesians 3:16--19

"I pray that . . . he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. "

[Teachers—a great discussion question for the class might be—"How have you experienced the love of Christ?" And it's corollary, "How have you shown His love?" Compare with physical experiences: How does being in an environment where love is openly expressed make you feel? Can you imagine knowing someone who has total unmitigated concern for you and your wellbeing—and makes that possible without regard to your merit to receive it? Someone who is in a position to know what is best for you, even if, at the moment, you would prefer something else.]

This concept ("God {Jesus} is love" and has your best interests at heart) is in direct conflict with the common perception of God as Judge and Enforcer of Rules—One bent on maintaining control and capable of acting capriciously (as we understand things). One of the bell weather tasks of the Christian community is, by conduct, to demonstrate what love is and how freely available it is—even from us earthlings to one another. Even as many folks have difficulty with the concept of God "as Father" because of prior experiences, believing that Christianity and the life of adherents to the faith is a demonstration of God's love is contrary to the conduct they observe among some "church folks."

[Consider the vicious conflict within denominations today over the primacy of scripture and its application to sex and gender—is it any wonder that proclamation of "God is love" by participants in such a struggle is not much of a draw to become embraced by such "love."]

Ephesians, Part 2

Unity in the Body of Christ

Ephesians 4:1-7

" I . . . beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift."

This fervent plea by Paul has a double thrust. He first enjoins all members of the church to "walk the talk"—fulfill the example and direction you have received and show the world what a difference being a Christian can make. Many of the new converts during these formative years of the church have no grounding in the practice of Christian love as a demonstration of what God is like and what "*growing into the fulness of Christ*" would mean. Then, as now, it was usually a "dog eat dog" existence.

The demeanor of the one in pursuit of the calling has been described as having learned the "humility of love." *The one who "knows the love of Christ and is filled with all the fulness of God"* (3:19) cannot simply know the theoretical principles; such knowledge of how costly was the grace he has received—and how hopeless was his plight and debt before he was trusted with the riches of his Lord—must have a profound impact on his

character. Such an impact will include notice taken of one's humility in every step of his walk of faith. Do I hear "compassion" towards others being suggested?

The message carried an extra impact when one considers the challenge for *"humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love"* is the word from the house-bound prisoner in Rome—beaten, outcast, starved on occasion and generally challenged in all he has done the last three to eight years.

[We all "know" much more about how a Christian should live than we exhibit in the face of daily challenges. Teacher, perhaps inquire of your hearers what techniques they might use for reining in a vigorous, even combative, persona so that Christ, not themselves, raw and maybe ugly, is what is on display for the needy one next door to see. Offer your own suggestions (testimony) regarding your coping techniques when challenged from time to time.]

Secondly, in this passage, is Paul's great cry for unity within the body of Christ. He acknowledges that it is not easy—*"making every effort to maintain the unity . . ."* Important to note is a pair key words in our religious vocabulary: grace, peace and hope is the first set. Without God's grace, there can be no peace; hearing and claiming the promises of God gives the one inspiration essential to a new pilgrim's Christian walk—hope. Without it, the zeal for the journey is too easily sapped and dies. We dare not miss the Lord's grace so freely given or the Spirit's blanket of peace if we are to press on with hope of joining the promised victorious band.

The second set—that for which, and resulting in which, unity is sought: (Lord, faith, baptism, and God and Father of all) are the essentials of the Christian premise; *i.e.*, (1) There is a God over creation—all of it; (2) His Son is Lord over man; (3) it is faith, not works, that unites us to Him; and (4) baptism signifies our own death and resurrection. We dare not omit or ignore any of these unifying precepts, as unique and different from Judaism or most secular lives, as they may be. Paul seems to be saying in opening his practicum "Lay hold on grace, peace and hope that brings you all together and daily remind yourselves of those essentials that must be held by all who claim this new relationship." Of such thoughts were the concluding words of Jesus' prayer in the Garden prior to his arrest, trials and crucifixion; "that they may be one in us; that they may be one even as we are one. (John 17)

Then he explains how it is supposed to work.

Gifts (Graces) for all Members of the Church

Ephesians 4:7, 11--13

" . . . Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. . . . The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

Paul, having addressed the highly personal attitude of Christian "follow-ship" in support of a unity of all, turns to the imperative of diversity within the church—"different strokes for different folks" we would say today. These are familiar words, perhaps first coming to the forefront (in the recent century) as a part of understanding the Charismatic Renewal that swept the Christian world fifty years ago.

There was in that movement much interest and pursuit of "the gifts" described here and in other passages. (*Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11 and 1 Cor 14*) These are the "ministerial gifts" or offices by which the work of the Holy Spirit is accomplished. As set forth in other gift descriptions, these functions are intentionally different but inherently interdependent on each other for the whole work to the body of Christ to be done.

The purpose of the variety of offices and tasks is precisely declared: *"for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith . . . to the measure of the full stature of Christ."* It was not intended that the apostles, prophets, pastors and others were to do the ministry work as much as they were directed to *"equip the saints for the work."* The principle is properly called "the elevation of the laity" to the first rank of ministers, reaching into everyman's world. Unfortunately, in too many churches today, it is the view from the pew that the members pay the bills and the preacher does the work.

Our church has had much teaching on the true roles of all members—clergy and lay alike—but with a large staff leading in many different areas, too often too much is done by those on the payroll and too little by the bulk of us. The cause of Christ is underserved by such conduct.

[A discussion would be helpful on the importance of the clerical roles—especially in a large, well-educated congregation—and of the imperative of all of us taking the message of the Gospel—by word and deed—into everyman's world. How do we move closer to the scriptural pattern? We don't need more teaching; we need more self-motivated action.]

If time permits, a discussion could follow on describing the various roles of the named categories of ministers—how does a prophet differ from an evangelist, or a pastor from an apostle; can you name some of each?

Also, distinguish the ministry office gifts (above) from the vocal service gifts of tongues, healing, prophecy, etc. described in Romans 12:6, 1 Cor 12:4-11 and chapter 14.]

Paramount in our understanding of the office gifts and service gifts is our inability to serve in any of these capacities apart from the Holy Spirit being active and at work within us to supply what is needed at the time. We recognize that at the time of one's acceptance of Christ as savior and lord, He implants his Holy Spirit within us—He becomes resident within. Therefore, the question is not "Do you have the Holy Spirit?" but "How much of you does the Holy Spirit have?"

Be Filled with the Spirit

Ephesians 5:15, 18--20

"Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil . . . Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Many books have been written on the subject of being filled with the Spirit and this is not the place to retrace those volumes other than to say that basic to the discussion is the understanding of our limitations apart from the Spirit's action and the great desire of the Spirit to fill (and re-fill time and again) Christ followers through whom spiritual work may be done.

Registering an openness to His presence in one's life; increasing our awareness of the promptings of the Spirit throughout the day; and responding whenever opportunity presents itself to speak words of encouragement, healing, love and, on occasion putting forth the wisdom that seems to come to you without effort and beyond your real experience level are all steps toward allowing oneself to be more and more filled with the Spirit.

One can go through the motions of religious-like activities and experiences with minimal input from the Spirit, but certainly the greater works—the ones that last—are only possible when the Spirit is moving mightily through a willing vessel.

As we understand this "mystery" of the faith, it is always appropriate to ask for "more of the Spirit in my life and journey." He (Spirit) is never offended by such a request made in sincerity with only Kingdom purposes in mind. In all likelihood He is much more active in you than you are aware of. Seek Him and let it flow.

[Testimony time]

Mutual Subjection – As unto Jesus

Ephesians 5:21--22, 28, 31--33; 6:1--3

"Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. . . husbands should love their wives. . . For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother—this is the first commandment with a promise: 'so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.'"

Perhaps no scripture has been the subject of more controversy than Ephesians 6:22 wherein it says for "wives be subject to your husbands." Isolated from the context and the rest of Chapter 5 (and by a time warp) move from Paul's prison in 55+/- AD to Tulsa 2,000 years later, the statement is guaranteed to create strongly opposing views of what society expects of marriage. That is not our debate today.

Put in the context of mutual subjection of any to all and overlaid by the practice of Christian love (as God loves), one can recognize that the mandate to the husbands to love their wives, *"just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"* is equally direct and probably more difficult to achieve than anything asked of wives.

This passage also aids in understanding the impropriety of the homosexual argument since two persons of the same sex cannot achieve the "one flesh" expectation given as a reason for marriage.

Implicit in mutual subjection to one another is the development and exhibition of a genuine attitude of humility underlying the practice of love for the *"members of [Christ's] body."* Beyond that, as I ask my law office clients to do: *"Read the document, give the words their natural meaning and do what it says. If that is not your intention, we have two choices: don't sign it, or let's negotiate changes in the text if the other party is amenable to them."* However, as written the intended purpose of a blessed home is more likely to result; that would always be our desire. This whole passage and parts in particular are familiar to all Christians who have been instructed in Christ's ways at all. It deserves the strictest adherence and requires minimal interpretation.

Whole Armor Enables Us to Stand in Spiritual Warfare

Ephesians 6:10--17

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic power of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

"Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

There are two things important in this passage—and "important" is an understatement of their significance. They are, of course, first, the declaration of an eternity-long condition

of our unwilling engagement in the battle between good and evil—between God and Satan—that gets masked by the secular, physical conditions and challenges of life, leading us to think those circumstances are the real problem. The second aspect of this passage is the description of the only weapons and protections truly useful in the defense of self and the pursuit of God's goal through us. Those unlikely (in terms of battling surface conflicts) elements of spiritual warfare must be donned daily and used frequently if one is to survive, much less succeed in our part of the battle of the ages. The alternative is not very pretty.

The primary defense—or offense, for that matter—is quite simply awareness of the underlying conflict and continual "fitness training" to master the weapons and condition the mind and heart for the battle. As a sporting team (football, for example) continually trains and learns about its game, its team mates, the opposition, and never lets up 'til the last game is played. They discover—perhaps in the fourth quarter—that stamina is the result of the "twice-a-day workouts" with which they began the season and the relentless drills to train both the mind and the muscle. Only with the hard work can their stamina outlast that of the opposition.

When we acknowledge that Satan has been at his game for much longer time than we have, it should be obvious that we, too, need some intentional workouts and training sessions in how to use our spiritual weapons and how to focus our minds on the resource of the Holy Spirit to guide and prepare us for our certain battles. Loafing in the locker room won't build the muscle and mindset needed for the fourth quarter!

Always Pray in the Spirit

Ephesians 6:18--20

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. . . . Pray also for me. . . .an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak."

Print this one on your morning coffee cup and beside your dinner plate. Make it your primary resource for enduring faithfulness to the Christ you have chosen to follow. As we acknowledge that we cannot "save" ourselves and, therefore, must claim Christ's blood as payment for our sins, we also must acknowledge that living that chosen life is impossible without the constant aid and support of the indwelling Holy Spirit, Who awaits our petition for His presence within us to be stronger and stronger, day by day.

[There are appended to this material pages containing only the scriptures, set in 20pt type for your possible use in creating transparency pages or reproducing the scriptures on hard copy for distribution to your class. In the event you are reproducing the material for hand out, you may want to reduce the type font to 12pt and conserve a few trees. The material is in Word format.]

Spiritual Blessings in Christ—Chosen by Him

Ephesians 1:3--8a

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us."

Mystery of God's Will

Ephesians 1:8b--10

"With all wisdom and insight he has made know to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

Our Inheritance—The Promised Holy Spirit

Ephesians 1:11a and 13

"In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance . . . so that we . . . might live for the praise of his glory.

"You . . . were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people"

Salvation by God's Grace Through Faith

Ephesians 2:8--10

". . . by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that on one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

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Ephesians 2: 11--13, 19--22; 3:4b--6

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" . . . the mystery of Christ [which] was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

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Gifts (Graces) for all Members of the Church

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**Whole Armor Enables Us to Stand in
Spiritual Warfare**

Ephesians 6:10--17

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"Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

Always Pray in the Spirit

Ephesians 6:18--20

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. . . . Pray also for me. . . .an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Paul at His Best; Living Spiritual Truths

Lesson Series for the Study of Statements by Paul the apostle as found in the books of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians

Philippians

To the teacher: the materials in each of the four books are presented for the whole book in one "lesson" that is intended to be taught in two succeeding sessions. Plan to save several of the memorable statements for the second lesson in each book—making sure that the context and "flow" of the first lesson is also mentioned in the second. You decide how far to go with each first lesson.

Background of Philippians. *This is another of Paul's "prison epistles," probably written from Rome sometime around A.D. 59-61. Paul dearly loved the church at Philippi, founding it in response to a divine call on his second missionary tour (Acts 16:8-10) and returning to visit at least twice afterward. The letter has less theology and more "love language" than any of his other letters. He focuses on love, joy, right thinking, worthy conduct and expresses gratitude for the church's frequent help and prayers.*

*The extreme conundrum to man's thinking is the juxtaposition of Paul's being in prison and simultaneously openly declaring that **"what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel"** and that though in prison he was **"happy and will continue to be happy."** Paul had put together the fact that with a continuum of Roman guards chained to him, he had been able to invade and greatly influence the palace itself—from the inside out—in more specific ways than any external campaign could ever have done. Those expressions, coupled with his categorical rejection of the worth of all he had attained prior to meeting Jesus near Damascus—**"Indeed I count everything as loss . . . count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him"**—entitle him to caution and advise his loved ones at Philippi on the right course for their lives—one that leads to finding Christ and all his power and peace.*

*In and around that church were some who were preaching divisive "gospels" and some who were clearly enemies of the gospel itself. Speaking with a pastor's heart, Paul advises right thinking and right conduct while being watchful about the message others might be presenting. In this letter is perhaps "the most sublime and profound statement of the meaning of the Incarnation" (2:5-11) and Paul's personal philosophy of life: **"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."** (1:21)*

Aid to Maturity

Writing as an encourager and one with fond memories of his various times with this church, he expresses great appreciation for their enduring "partnership in the gospel." He speaks of their always being in "every prayer of mine," but conscious of the fact that Christ's working within them was not yet complete or without possible future challenge.

Philippians 1:8 God began doing a good work in you, and I am sure he will continue it until it is finished when Jesus Christ comes again.

[Here, one might easily discuss the fact that "being born of the Spirit" is different from being "mature in Christ"; that the Christian walk is a "process" jointly engaged in by the person and the Spirit.]

The Blessing Prayer

Paul continues with a highly desirable blessing prayer that any of us might, daily, pray for all those on our "list" or within our reach of relationships. Is not such a model prayer what we want for our children, spouse, close friends, co-workers, and others whose names the Lord brings to mind? Paul was unabashed in telling the Philippians exactly what prayer he voiced for them and how high were his expectations. It never hurts, when such is your prayer, that *the object knows exactly what you are asking and expecting* he/she and God will do and produce as a result. Oh, that every college dorm, individual office, and kitchen refrigerator have set forth on its expectations being placed before God for the occupants of such spaces.

Philippians 1:9 . . . My prayer for you: that your love (of Christ) will grow more and more; that you will have knowledge and understanding with your love; that you will see the difference between good and bad and will choose the good; that you will be pure and without wrong for the coming of Christ; that you will be filled with the good things produced in your life by Christ to bring glory and praise to God.

We often seem to run out of words (or even concepts) in our prayers—both for ourselves and for others—especially when we limit the "I need . . ." section of our prayers. In such a case, Paul's petition on behalf of the Philippians might be a good place to start our prayers. It can also be a great encouragement to us (or anyone, for that matter) that we are prayed for by our friends. It is an inducement to the "pray-ee" to do his/her duty, that we may not disappoint the expectations of praying friends and ministers.

Note that in such a prayer we are not only urging love, and more love, but also knowledge, understanding (discernment) and an awareness of the difference between good and bad. What noble disciples of Christ would be any who received such a prayer and consciously moved in the directions indicated by his/her friend's praying. "Filled with the good things" clearly references the good fruit of the Holy Spirit

[Examine your prayer life and note the repetition of certain areas of concern and, perhaps, the omission of prayers like Paul's prayer for his beloved Philippians. Let us all expand the scope and reach of our prayers by careful study of Paul's frequent prayers for those whom he introduced to Jesus and set them in household churches, etc.]

Living or Dying—Which is Better?

Philippians 1:18-25 . . . they are preaching about Christ. So, I am happy, and I will continue to be happy. . . . whether I live or die. To me the only important thing about living is Christ, and dying would be profit for me. If I continue living in my body, I will be able to work for the Lord. I do not know what to choose—living or dying. . . . I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is much better, but you need me here in my body. . . . I will stay with you to help you grow and have joy in your faith.

Paul was initially aware of other "messengers of the gospel"—some of whom were outright enemies of Paul; others were merely additional preachers of the Good News. He confidently says that either group is doing good, if they only keep the Old Testament laws and continue with their preaching. And then, verse 21 declares his philosophy of life: *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."* As with Paul, the glory of Christ ought to be the end of our life, the grace of Christ the principle of our life, and the word of Christ the rule of it. To such, to die will be gain. It is easily recognized that to a carnal worldly man, death is a great loss—he loses all his comforts and all his hopes. But for the good Christian, it is gain—the end of all his weakness and misery and the perfection of his accomplishments and hopes. It will be the end of all tears, sickness and sin; conflict will be no more and lack will disappear.

Having in mind such life calling, he urges his colleagues to *"let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ so that . . . you stand firm . . . for it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake . . ."* (v 27-29). As pleased as Paul is with the "success of the gospel" in the palace and throughout the entire Roman guard because of his imprisonment, and as encouraging as he can be to those of his readers to emulate his life and focus on Christ, he must also alert them that such a life will also include *"suffer(ing) for his sake."*

[In today's world in the USA, one might wonder if we are failing to so conduct ourselves that suffering for Christ would be a very present experience. Those in other lands, many times, do not enjoy such an exemption. Is our lack of opposition due to the weakness of our witness? We certainly are aware of much ungodliness on all sides.]

Same Mindset as Christ

Philippians 2:1-3 (NASB) Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, . . . any consolation of love, . . . any fellowship of the Spirit, . . . any . . . compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves. 2:5-8 (NIV) In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: . . . he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant . . . he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.

One of Paul's apparent purposes in writing to the Philippians was to encourage them in their daily conduct and personal relationships. There was no higher model to suggest than that of Christ Himself; nor any more constant guide than the selfless example Jesus lived out before the world. Loving, united, focused on one purpose, humble as a servant would briefly describe Paul's injunctions. This is the "to do" list for each of us. It is not enough "to believe"; faith must be accompanied by works that demonstrate our message. Unfortunately, whether we intend it or not, our works will demonstrate the message of our lives—read loud and clear by all with whom we have contact. This verse also clearly sets forth the dual nature—fully God and fully man—that Jesus walked out among us. As a

man, he set forth a model of behavior for us to emulate; as God, he exercised the powers of the Holy Spirit, in ways that we can (at least partly) follow when we allow the Spirit His freedom within us.

All Bow and Confess Jesus is Lord

Philippians 2:9-11(RSV) God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord . . .

Paul's primary focus is not being a "futurist," but here he does open wide the door on what goes on in heaven and—one day—will occur on earth. What a surprise it will be to many that one day life will be lived as if in taking any forward steps one must first pass under a three-foot high bar; only by kneeling can one go under it. The Bible may be desecrated, denied, defamed, ignored and even destroyed, but if it is true, this one statement changes everything.

[It is not common that we have the ability to know how something will turn out in the end—we have to walk by faith—and even then, we know neither the events nor the consequences of the paths we have chosen. Consider Paul's desire to go to Rome to spread the gospel, finding out that he has to do it from chains in prison. Here we have the end of the story quite clearly spelled out. Jesus wins.]

God Works Within Us to Complete Our Salvation

Philippians 2:12 . . . Keep on working to complete your salvation with fear and trembling, because God is working in you to help you want to do and be able to do what pleases him.

Paul here stresses both the free agency of man and the absolute sovereignty of God. He urges the Philippians to "*work out their own salvation*" as though they were fully responsible and capable of good by their own exertions. In the next breath he adds, "*for God is at work in you . . . for his good pleasure*" as though the responsibility were all God's. The two seeming conflicting concepts may be harmonized by recognizing that because God is at work in believers, and God's grace is available, believers are able to achieve the purposes for which God has saved them. It is properly understood, as one has put it: "There's man's part and there's God's part."

Abandoning Trash; Possessing Christ

In Chapter 3, Paul compares and contrasts his before and after conversion "achievements," ultimately determining that all he had gained by birth, study, obedience to the rules and as a byproduct of his stature, was of no value compared with "knowing Christ." He even declared all those honors and claims to fame were "worthless trash." The overarching claim he now makes of something worthwhile is "the greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." His amazing contrast of seemingly worthy goals, highly recognized by the society from which he came, with the new-found purpose of belonging

to Christ and being right with God, even leads him to embrace Christ's sufferings as his own destiny—ultimately to be "like him in his death."

The message here is that what seems like the pinnacle of power and effectiveness may be solely man's view of what is important, and that raises the possibility that a life pursuing such goals may obscure a better aim in life, namely knowing and becoming like Jesus in all that we think, say or do.

Philippians 3:4-11 . . . I have greater reason for trusting in myself . . . Those things were important to me, but now I think they are worth nothing because of Christ. . . I think that all things are worth nothing compared with the greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him, I have lost all those things, and now I know they are worthless trash. This allows me to have Christ and to belong to him. Now I am right with God . . . I want to know Christ and the power that raised him from the dead. I want to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death. Then I have hope that I myself will be raised from the dead.

[Discussion: What goals and which persons are accorded the highest honor and prestige today? How many of those goals have we pursued (and maybe achieved) in our pursuit of what makes us effective, popular, powerful, and comfortable? What could make us pursue Paul's goal of knowing and becoming like Jesus—when it is not the most popular route to the top? Do we have any candidates to join in Christ's suffering and death? Does our comfort with life as it is keep us from pursuing Christ's highest call? Would the answer be different if you were impoverished and homeless? Which group needs hope the most?]

Reaching for the Prize

Philippians 3:13-15 . . .there is one thing I always do. Forgetting the past and straining toward what is ahead, I keep trying to reach the goal and get the prize for which God called me through Christ to the life above. All of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, too.

If Paul's frequently remembered statements were arranged in order of our greater recall, certainly this is one high on the list: "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." One might wonder at the power behind his determination and perseverance of his goal. Verse 12 makes it clear that Paul knows he is not "as God wants me to be. I have not yet reached that goal, but . . . Christ wants me to do that, which is the reason he made me his." (NCV) The key thought here is that it was Christ who "made me his own" (RSV), i.e., He "apprehended me" (KJV). ("We love him because he first loved us." I John iv:19) We don't hold onto Christ, He holds us, loves us and wants to put his Spirit fully in us in order that we can become what God wants us to be.

Out with Worry; In with Prayer and Thanksgiving

It is easy to say and hard to live out—"no worry, instead, pray"—but Paul, who personally knows the ins and outs of anxious moments, advises those he loves the most to do just that. His urging is that God is in the business of giving what we need—maybe not all we

want—but he wants us to pray to Him as if He is the true source of all blessing and comfort—and to do so "with thanksgiving." (Sounds like "gratitude"—that virtue so missing among us today.)

Philippians 4:6-7 Do not worry about anything, but pray and ask God for everything you need, always giving thanks. And God's peace, which is so great we cannot understand it, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Right Thinking; God Works in Everything

Finally, one of the other most familiar Pauline quotes:

Philippians 4:8-9 (MSG) ...Whatever is true...honorable ...just...pure...lovely...gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. . . . Do what you learned and received from me, . . . and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

This is one of the most powerful passages elevating what we spend our time thinking about to being both powerful in changing our lives and pleasing to God Himself. If there is one thing we mere human's "control," it is our thought life. This passage declares how important that is to God.

Satisfaction Whether Rich or Poor; Always Enabled in Christ

Our concluding passage is probably the most familiar:

Philippians 4:11-13, 19 I have learned to be satisfied with the things I have and with everything that happens. I know how to live when I am poor, and I know how to live when I have plenty. I have learned the secret of being happy at any time in everything that happens, when I have enough to eat and when I go hungry, when I have more than I need and when I do not have enough. I can do all things through Christ, because he gives me strength. . . . My God will use his wonderful riches in Christ Jesus to give you everything you need.

[Discussion: How has poverty or prosperity affected your relationship with God and your daily conduct, particularly about the call He has placed on your life. What do you do differently when you have plenty as compared with your choices when you have little? Which condition enhances your relationship with God and which makes you resort to your own help and sufficiency?]

[There are appended to this material pages containing only the scriptures, set in 20pt type for your possible use in creating transparency pages or reproducing the scriptures on hard copy for distribution to your class. In the event you are reproducing the material for hand out, you may want to reduce the type font to 12pt and conserve a few trees. The material is in Word format.]

Aid to Maturity

Philippians 1:8 God began doing a good work in you, and I am sure he will continue it until it is finished when Jesus Christ comes again.

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Philippians 1:9. . . My prayer for you: that your love (of Christ) will grow more and more; that you will have knowledge and understanding with your love; that you will see the difference between good and bad and will choose the good; that you will be pure and without wrong for the coming of Christ; that you will be filled with the good things produced in your life by Christ to bring glory and praise to God.

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Paul at His Best; Living Spiritual Truths

Lesson Series for the Study of Statements by Paul the Apostle as found in the books of Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians

Colossians

To the teacher: the materials in each of the four books are presented for the whole book in one "lesson" that is intended to be taught in two succeeding sessions. Plan to save several of the memorable statements for the second lesson in each book—making sure that the context and "flow" of the first lesson is also mentioned in the second. You decide how far to go with each first lesson.

Background of Colossians—Please consult and draw from the Summary document attached to Lesson 1 for materials relevant to the book of Colossians.

Thanksgiving and Three Christian Basics.

Colossians 1:3-6 We always thank God . . . because we have heard about the faith you have in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all of God's people. You have this faith and love because of your hope, and what you hope for is kept safe for you in heaven. You learned about this hope when you heard the message about the truth, the Good News that was told to you.

Paul's thankfulness is a primary point of his character and belief system. If you think about the true meaning of it, thankfulness is certainly more than one of the niceties of human relationships. It is a factor in creative influence. Only the grateful and appreciative guide can draw the best out of those whom he seeks to lead. This is because the spirit of thanksgiving (call it "gratitude") reveals the dominant attitude of one's own life toward others. Paul is thankful to others for the Colossian church since he has not been there.

The multiple words identifying the Savior (Lord Jesus Christ) had different meaning to the gentiles than to the Jews. To the Jews, the office of Messiah (Christ) was of great importance and identified the role He played in God's economy. To the gentiles, it had no such meaning and became mostly His name, with or without the word Jesus. The word translated Lord is *Kyrios*, a label attached to many gods in the pagan realms and to the Roman emperor. Therefore, its application to Christ was a challenge to all other religious allegiance of the time. Paul (Rom 10:9) clearly supported the suitability of calling Jesus "Lord" since by confessing with one's mouth that "Jesus is *Kyrios*" coupled with belief that God raised him from the dead, "thou shalt be saved."

The trilogy of faith, love and hope here mentioned as being expressions of the Colossians speaks of faith as directed to Christ (what He has done in the past as the finished work of salvation); love is directed to the fellow Christians as an expression of life in the present; while hope is what we hold onto for our eternal spiritual destiny—that part is still future to happen.

I Cor 13 is only one place in the New Testament where these three virtues are coupled. Each is essential in the life of a Christian, and without any one of them, we have no assurance of anything worthwhile spiritually. In particular "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (I Cor 15:19). How fortunate that our hope "is kept safe for (us) in heaven."

Such hope is the foundation of a Christian world view. It is not the result of a determination or disposition of a man, but it rests on who God is and what he has done in Christ. It is our possession because God gives it to us; we do not generate it by our efforts. That world view holds forth great possibilities for all men who accept the lordship of Christ because it is God at work in them and in any such saved man are unlimited potentialities.

Comprehensive, Universal Prayer

***Colossians 1:9-10 We have continued praying for you, asking God that
You will know fully what he wants;
You will also have great wisdom and understanding in spiritual things;
You will live the kind of life that honors and pleases the Lord in every way.
You will produce fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God.***

The first part and main emphasis of this prayer for the "saints" at Colossae is that they will fully know God's will—what He wants. Is there anything more important to a Christian—whether newly converted or a long-time believer—than knowing the will of the Father?

It may be that our lack of such key knowledge is due to one of two (or both) of (i) not praying and asking to know it and (ii) not recognizing when His will is made known to us. Of course, it is possible that the revelation is contrary to what we wanted to hear. It may suggest a change in us—attitude, action, or desire that was not the direction we wanted to hear.

The prayer for another can always safely include a request that they may be brought into the understanding of what His will is—for their particular situation as well as for the whole life before them. The declared purpose of such knowledge is that it will "issue" in a life worth of the Lord, bringing forth good fruit. Standing firm with patience and endurance is more likely and done with greater commitment if one is aware that it is God's will he/she is pursuing.

There is an important trilogy here that we must not miss: knowledge, wisdom and understanding. Three very different concepts, with significantly different results. Knowledge is grasping the raw truth of something, knowing what happened or will occur based on pure facts. (One can know about God and even about his interaction with man,

but not do anything about it. Belief and hope (two very essential parts of one's life are rational only if founded on facts produced by knowledge from some source of reality.)

Wisdom is knowing what to do with the facts produced by knowledge. It usually is inclusive of possible courses of action that are not readily apparent from just knowing the facts. We say someone is "wise" whom we have found capable of looking beyond the bare facts and seeing both a path and an objective result that comes only from God himself. One who is only "smart" and in possession of much learning, does not discern what one with God's wisdom sees and cannot make the best use of his knowledge.

Spiritual understanding implies one's ability to link this world's system with the spiritual forces that govern life in the here and now and the consequences of our participation in the dailiness of physical life on eternity—for us and those observing our conduct.

[Discussion could include How does one gain knowledge—facts—about the Christian walk and the Lord whom we serve, as well as helping the hearers learn how to listen for God's wisdom; How does one "see beyond the facts" to the effect on spiritual matters of a course of conduct. Testimony time on these topics.]

Facing Troubles, God's Power Enables Patience and Joy

Colossians 1:11 God will strengthen you with his own great power so that you will not give up when troubles come, but you will be patient and you will joyfully give thanks to the Father who has made you able to have a share in all that he has prepared for his people in the kingdom of light. (RSV—"made us partakers of the inheritance of the saints.")

Endurance, patience and thankfulness are virtues we all desire. Here it is made clear the *source* of such capabilities is "the Father who has made you able . . ." Such maturity is not accomplished by even a faithful follower of Christ; like all other characteristics of our being, growing up into these virtues is God's work in willing men and women. In the natural, we never have enough staying power or patience—and we certainly do not know how to be appropriately thankful for His work in us—and to do so with joy reflects even more of God's working in us. Our human natures do not work that way. One mark of our society is its lack of gratitude, which, down deep, is really idolatry (we can do it; we did it without God's help or assistance; therefore, why should I be grateful?)

Jesus, as God's Son, Was Creator of All

Colossians 1:15-16 (NASB) (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rules or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.

There cannot be a more fundamental distinguishing core belief than the declaration that the Son of God was the creator of all things and that they were created for Him. These words divide humanity in at least two categories—Christian and non-Christian. Today,

the belief in a creator God who made man and the whole world is the beginning point for one's relationship with Him. To deny Jehovah's role, is to turn matters on their head: one then must create his own god—a man-made god—instead of man, made by God.

Although insisting on His role in creation may not be the point at which a conversation leading to one's conversion starts, nonetheless, that fact underlies and precedes the "salvation by death on the cross" narrative. It is the basic fact to explain His status and capacity to save. It also explains the love of Jesus for His creation—it was His in the first place and He wants it back—especially the people part of our realm.

You cannot explain the ultimate meaning of things without taking into account the unique revelation of the nature and destiny of man and of God's relationship to the world that has been given in Christ. The continuing struggle to harmonize science and religion, though a difficult task, occurs in every generation—all over again. Although a mystery, the truth of a creator God and a redeemer Son continues to be the power and comfort afforded those in whom dwell "the mind of Christ."

For example, and to give substance to the mystery, he put himself forth as the image of the invisible God as he resembles, represents and reveals Him. As Lord over nature, demons, illness, death and all manner of men, the *re-creative* power claimed from the beginning was showcased for a moment in time as He walked the Judean hills.

We could never, in a thousand years, have conceived the answer to the dilemma and destruction of sin in the lives of His creations that puts a person of the godhead on a cruel cross as satisfaction of the requirement of a righteous God for a blood sacrifice—once for all—to suffice for the sins of all generations who believe. Who then confirmed it all with an empty tomb and an impartation of the Holy Spirit?

That, then, makes possible the greatest of all mysteries—that it is Jesus' intention to live inside those united with him so his power and love can flow from mere man. We are witnesses to such transformations in our day and time. The mystery becomes a well-documented miracle.

[The material discussing Col 1:15-16 is as "heavy" as any explanation can be, but it is also the most fundamental and important. Don't rush through it and fail to give ample time for it to really soak in. As among Christians, there is nothing controversial about anything set forth; but grasping the enormity of it and letting it settle within one's consciousness can change how they "walk the walk," perhaps for the first time really understanding the difference their guiding principles are from those of the world around them. With better grasp of these core beliefs, one gains confidence in relying on the Spirit within to guide with knowledge, wisdom and understanding.]

Enemies of God in Your Mind, God Befriended You with Christ's Death

Colossians 1:21-23 At one time you were separated from God. You were his enemies in your minds, and the evil things you did were against God. But now God has made you his friends again. He did this through Christ's death in the body so that he might bring you into God's presence as people who are holy, with no wrong . . . This will

happen if you continue strong and sure in your faith. You must not be moved away from the hope brought to you by the Good News.

From this passage, note the root cause/place from which alienation of man from God occurred—"your minds." Although we know God as a fully sovereign ruler, He has endowed us with one aspect that can subvert His sovereignty—He gave us free will in order that we could choose to relate to Him and not be like the angels who have no choice. That choice is made by our minds—and can be changed by our minds. Since we are in control of our thoughts and intentions, accepting the consequences of such choices, our entry into Christ's kingdom is dependent on our choice. But choice alone would not be enough; it is God who has "made us his friends again. He did this . . ."

With our minds we place ourselves in a position that God can do His work in and through us—but never think that what is then done in man is his doing; it is always God at work in us to accomplish his will. Foremost in that will is being brought "into God's presence (by Him) as people who are holy, with no wrong." The result is a new status of human life in relation to God, and with it, a new character.

[There are two foci of this passage: the role of man's mind in analyzing and making choices—accepting the consequences of those decisions—and the categorical fact that God is the actor and enabler of the good things that can result from the right choices. We choose; He enables holiness. The concluding phrases emphasize the necessity of our mind-choice remaining immovable (" . . . continue strong and sure in your faith," hanging onto . . . hope.)]

Paul's Special Work—Telling God's Secret

Colossians 1:24-27 I am happy in my sufferings for you. . . God gave me a special work to do that helps you . . . to tell fully the message of God . . . that was hidden from everyone since the beginning of time, but now it is made known to God's holy people . . . this rich and glorious secret which he has for all people [read "Gentiles"]. The secret is Christ himself, who is in you. He is our only hope for glory.

Paul speaks of his sufferings and his "special work" "to tell fully the message of God" and to reveal the "secret" not made obvious through all the centuries of Jewish history; namely, that God's salvation and conversion to being "holy people" was a message for all people, "Gentiles" as they were frequently called—meaning not just Jews. Breaking down the wall between the nationalities and opening God's grace and invitation to the world beyond Judea was Paul's life mission.

The fact that the message is for all peoples is not only a declaration of inter-national salvation possibilities, but within a people, the message is for all: tax collectors, fishermen, doctors, thieves, kings, soldiers, merchants, rich, poor, ill and grieving; even dead persons were called back to life. The message is without bounds of any kind. Paul was the first to push back the boundaries of spiritual propriety to include nations otherwise thought beyond the reach of God's grace and love.

This means that every person with whom you have contact or relationship is intended to be embraced within God's plan and one in whom Christ desires to dwell. When our conduct presumes otherwise, we are missing the mark and keeping the "secret" from those who may need it the most. If you will not tell them the secret, who will?

Jesus's Incarnation

Colossians 2:9 (NASB) *In Christ there is all of God in a human body.*

The incarnation (God coming as a man) is one of those mysteries we must accept in faith. But the evidence is strong that that is exactly what happened. The purpose of the Son's becoming like us was to reveal the Father and represent him to mankind. In presenting the life long story—"this is how my Father thinks and acts"—for men to see how God works when human, was the most compelling fashion to demonstrate what being "conformed to Christ" might look like.

In such manner he demonstrated the moral nature and loving heart of God. The power of Christ within enables one to live a life morally right in obedience toward God and in unselfish good will toward one's fellow man—just like Jesus did when he was physically here. The purpose of the incarnation was to demonstrate that no condition, circumstance or power can frustrate the saving work of God in man's soul except only man's intentional exercise of his freedom of choice to reject the new life God offers. (Remember the rich ruler whose wealth prevented a choice in favor of Christ as compared with the thief on the cross whose choice merited Paradise that night.)

[Never can we be as complete as Jesus was in his incarnation, but the "plan" is that Christ is still embodied in human form by the presence of his Spirit within those whose allegiance he has won. As we are 21st century "incarnations" of God through his Spirit, we would do well to emulate His conduct and focus on His Father and His will.]

Death by Baptism; Victory by Resurrection

Colossians 2:12-15 *When you were baptized, you were buried with Christ, and you were raised up with him through your faith in God's power that was shown when he raised Christ from the dead. . . . You were spiritually dead, God made you alive with Christ, and he forgave all our sins. He canceled the debt . . . nailed it to the cross. . . . With the cross, he won the victory and showed the world that they were powerless.*

No more graphic image could symbolize the transactions between God and His creation than the picture of water baptism as compared with death and resurrection.

Again, the operative power is God who "made you alive with Christ. . ." We initiate that change of life and allegiance by an act of our will to pursue "faith in God's power" to make us truly alive, forgiven and victorious. (There is man's part and God's part.)

We cringe at the image of Jesus, beaten, cursed, humiliated, dying on the cross and "hear" the cries of victory from the devils in hell. But though the execution was accounted by God to be sufficient for our sins, if the story had ended at that point, the verdict would have been "God was defeated." And our claim to a new life because of His death would have been hollow. The victory, as we now know, was in the resurrection when new life was restored/given/claimed by the godhead for Jesus, the "firstborn from the dead."

It is the nature of things that before there can be a resurrection, there must be a death—as cruel and defeating as it seemed. But that is the very nature of things—a seed must die before the plant can emerge; one thing must pass away to make way for the new. Jesus' death was an essential precursor to his resurrection.

How often we see in daily lives the necessity for a "death" to occur before the new can materialize. We lay down control and gain infilling by the Spirit to energize from within the new life we claim.

[Discussion could include a self-analysis to identify elements of our life that need to be set aside in order for new direction to come forth. (In business, we call it "destructive creation" meaning that the old has to give way to the new and that sometimes dictates the destruction of the old as the new forces its way in. Think: cameras with film that needs processing compared with photos taken digitally—no processing required and they are instantly editable.) Individually, we do not have to kill something as much as we have to turn loose of it and cease reliance on lesser powers and goals—so that what God wants to do within and through us can rise up.]

Aim Higher

Colossians 2:20; 3:1-2 Since you died with Christ and were made free from the ruling spirits of the world, why do you act as if you still belong to this world . . .? Since you were raised from the dead with Christ, aim at what is in heaven, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Think only about the things in heaven, not the things on earth.

The key words here are "act" and "think." It was with our minds that we formed the thought and plan to accept Christ; it will be required that we maintain that mind-focus until we meet the Master. Virtually all of our actions are the result of an intent formed in the mind. Some of them are so embedded we call them "habits"—but they, too, were formed initially in the same manner. "*You are what you think*" is not merely a trite saying; it is gospel truth and the guideline for the development of character and conduct. Change the idea you pursue and you change the direction of everything about your life.

Paul is here referring the Colossians to their baptism and calling them to account for their conduct, based their thought life. ". . . *meditation upon things divine surpass the delights of sense, not in power only but in sweetness also.*" (HCG Moule) The Colossian situation involved many theories about how life—even Christian life—was to be lived and what were the measurements of a successful life. Those teachings failed to break the Christian's involvement in the material world of material forces, interests and values. Paul would refocus them on "*the things in heaven, not the things on earth.*"

[Note the difficulty Christians today have of not applying materialistic measures—commonly used in business life—to the goals of one committed to serving Christ. Discuss how to determine and focus on the spiritual values and goals that lift our sights to heaven.]

Exclusions from Life

Colossians 3:5, 8-9 Put all evil things out of your life: sexual sinning, doing evil, letting evil thoughts control you, wanting things that are evil, and greed. . . . Also put these things out of your life: anger, bad temper, doing or saying things to hurt others, and using evil words when you talk. Do not lie to each other.

Here Paul speaks of exclusions from the life of a believer—things that must not remain in one claiming Christ's lordship. The two groups of exclusions focus first on sins of the flesh, while the second speaks to sins of the spirit. It is obvious that Paul is expecting the gospel to make a difference in how Christians live—and what the regenerating power of the Spirits must change. His is a most practical theology that hardly needs explanation, except to dwell on the threshold question of "How does one make these changes?"

[What is here expected by Paul is beyond the power of mere man to achieve—a radical transformation of one's life conduct. The resolve must be there to do so, but only through the Spirit's power from within the believer can such changes be affected. Probably the best explanation of what is needed is a conscious surrender of one's will to the Spirit's leading, hour by hour and day by day.]

No Distinctions in Christ

Colossians 3:11 In the new life there is no difference between Greeks and Jews, circumcised and not circumcised, or people who are foreigners (Think: "Gentiles") . . . There is no difference between slaves and free people. But Christ is in all believers, and Christ is all that is important.

This enumeration of the various classes commonly separating men from each other (race, religious traditions, cultural and social differences) and the declaration of no difference between such classes was a bold, new revelation to the Colossians—as it is to many Christians today when they consider what it might mean. This is what the "new nature" in Christ makes both necessary and possible.

Not only does this revelation emphasize the unity of Christ within each and all Christians and direct that all discriminations based on human differences be set aside, but it plainly proposes that in all such classes are persons of worth for whom Christ died—and a potential brother in Christ. Everyone we meet is one for whom Christ died.

[Although it is not a new thought for most Christians, the practical working out of the knowledge that all contacts are either with one in whom Christ dwells (even if mostly hidden) or one in whom Christ desires to dwell must inform our conduct toward them and the nature of our mission (whatever we thought was the reason we encountered them). How does that change you trip to the grocery, the school ground or your work place?]

Inclusions in Life

Colossians 3:12-15; 4:5 God has chosen you and made you his holy people. He loves you. So, you should always clothe yourselves with mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other, and forgive each other . . . Let the peace that Christ gives control your thinking. . . . Be wise in the way you act with people who are not believers, making the most of every opportunity.

Where verses 5 and 8 talk about exclusions from the life of a Christian, these verses contain guidance for what should be included—apparently from the standpoint that these virtues may be missing from the lives of some Christians. Here, as motive and capability to embrace these necessary characteristics Christians are described as "chosen," "holy," and "beloved" (*think*: an adopted child's understanding of being a part of a family) by God. Again, God is the actor in making these titles reality; He also will enable the transformation of one's basic nature to show forth his new nature. Paul requires that "your thinking" be under Christ's control.

For those of us whose birth status placed us in daily contact with the influences of a Christian community that encourages a saving acceptance of Christ, Paul would require that we, as God's chosen ones, give contagious witness to the joy of Christian living. Perhaps in energetic pursuit as such a witness, the readiness of the church to fulfill the Great Commission will be done more completely.

One commentator has put it this way (which sounds very much like what we have heard from our own pastor on several occasions): *"Be alive to opportunities for personal witness. Live alert to Christ and for Christ, in the experience of every moment. Seize the critical moment as it comes, the chance encounter, the unforeseen turn in the conversation, the unplanned incident which brings a Christian mind and a pagan mind into momentary contact, 'making the proper use of the occasion' for wise and effective Christian witness. Be prepared for such opportunities, expect them to come, and grasp them when they do come."* (G. Preston MacLeod)

Managing Relationships

Colossians 3:18-4:1

Wives, yield to the authority of your husbands;

Husbands, love your wives and be gentle with them;

Children, obey your parents in all things;

Fathers, do not nag your children;

Slaves, obey your masters in all things . . . work the best you can.

Work as if you were doing it for the Lord not for people; you will receive your reward from the Lord; you are serving the Lord Christ;

Masters, give what is good and fair to your slaves. Remember that you have a Master in heaven.

Thanksgiving and Three Christian Basics.

Colossians 1:3-6 We always thank God . . . because we have heard about the faith you have in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all of God's people. You have this faith and love because of your hope, and what you hope for is kept safe for you in heaven. You learned about this hope when you heard the message about the truth, the Good News that was told to you.

Comprehensive, Universal Prayer

***Colossians 1:9-10 We have continued praying for you, asking God that
You will know fully what he wants;
You will also have great wisdom and understanding in spiritual things;
You will live the kind of life that honors and pleases the Lord in every way.
You will produce fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God.***

***Facing Troubles, God's Power Enables
Patience and Joy***

Colossians 1:11 God will strengthen you with his own great power so that you will not give up when troubles come, but you will be patient and you will joyfully give thanks to the Father who has made you able to have a share in all that he has prepared for his people in the kingdom of light. (RSV—"made us partakers of the inheritance of the saints.")

Jesus, as God's Son, Was Creator of All

Colossians 1:15-16 (NASB) (Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rules or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.

***Enemies of God in Your Mind, God Befriended
You with Christ's Death***

Colossians 1:21-23 At one time you were separated from God. You were his enemies in your minds, and the evil things you did were against God. But now God has made you his friends again. He did this through Christ's death in the body so that he might bring you into God's presence as people who are holy, with no wrong . . . This will happen if you continue strong and sure in your faith. You must not be moved away from the hope brought to you by the Good News.

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