

As we have been working our way through Paul's epistle to the Colossians, the issue of false teaching has been part of the context. One of the reasons that the letter was written was that there were people seeking to influence the congregation with teaching that was not in harmony with the message that Paul had received from God. The message that they had originally heard from Epaphras had been the authentic God-given message of salvation in Jesus Christ, but there were teachers in Colossae who were teaching something that was not in harmony with the truth of the revealed gospel that Paul was teaching.

As we have worked our way through this letter, it has gradually become apparent that this was something of great concern to the apostle. One interesting note about his approach in this letter is that he spends a lot of time expounding the truth before he gets to dealing explicitly with the error. He does not always take that approach. For instance in the letter to the Galatians he has a lot more to say about the error that he is dealing with in the opening chapters of the letter. But from Paul's approach here we learn that one of the effective strategies to help the church deal with error is to teach the truth. There is a place for dealing with error explicitly, but Paul's approach in this letter affirms the great importance of a solid knowledge of the truth in order to resist false teaching.

Paul's letter to the Colossians shows us the importance of knowing more than just the basics of the truth as it is in Christ. Paul has dealt with some pretty profound truth so far in this letter. There is considerable meat in the first chapter of this letter and the part of chapter 2 that we have covered. There is a lot of depth here. And Paul is writing for the church here. This is not an academic work addressed to scholars. This is preaching. It is addressed to church members. Clearly Paul expects them to stretch themselves to learn what he is teaching them. He is doing that because what he is teaching is necessary for the growth of ordinary Christians. He is feeding their souls. He is conveying to them truth that is more precious than gold. But it is also a key part of the way that he is equipping them to resist the error that was being presented to them by the false teachers.

This is one of the reasons it is so important for us to know our Bible doctrine. When it comes to our relationship with God and our spiritual wellbeing, truth is vital, and error is deadly. This is more than clear from the way in which Paul and the other apostles were so passionate to refute false teaching. One of the great strategies that Satan uses to sicken and weaken and destroy believers is false teaching of various kinds. In 2 Corinthians 11:14 Paul says that "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." What that means is that he is behind false teaching that claims to be truth. False teachers are always claiming to be teaching the truth. They are claiming to bring light. But Satan is behind it and his goal is the destruction of our souls. And one of the key ways that we are equipped to recognize what is false is by having a thorough understanding of the truth.

In our text for this evening, Paul brings his second explicit warning about the false teachers. Back in 2:4 he had written, "I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments." Now in verse 8 he says,

“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

“See to it.” This is a call to action. He is addressing the members of the church and he tells them “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit....” He is telling them that it is their responsibility to make sure that they are not deceived by the errors that were circulating around them. He is saying, “Equip yourselves to be able to recognize error when you see it.” Paul was providing them with truth, and they were to learn what he was teaching them so that they would be able to resist the errors that were being presented to them as truth.

Now it is true that elders are to guard the flock against error. One of the qualifications for the office of elder according to Titus 1:9 is that “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” But elders can only do so much. Teachers can only do so much. It takes effort on the part of church members to learn what is being taught. And that is what Paul is stressing in our text when he says to church members – “You see to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit....” You need to be active to learn and discern.

You need to learn. Learning takes effort. It takes discipline. You need to pay attention when you are being taught. You need to be actively seeking to understand and remember. You need to study the Bible. You need to use the resources that are available to help you to understand it. You need to put forth the effort necessary to know the truth well enough so that you can see the lie when it is presented to you. That is what Paul means when he says, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit.” Do what it takes to be knowledgeable enough about the truth so that you will not be taken in by error.

Notice next that Paul speaks about being **taken captive** by philosophy and empty deceit. False teaching is a prison. If you embrace false teaching you have been captured. You are in bondage. You can only be free by thinking and living by the truth of the word of God. Remember what Jesus said in John 8:32-33, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Freedom in the Bible is very different from the way in which the world thinks about freedom. Our culture thinks of freedom as choosing for ourselves what we will believe and how we will live. The cry of freedom is: “No one can tell me what to believe. No one can tell me what to think. No one can tell me how to live my life. No one can tell me what to do with my body.” This way of thinking about freedom qualifies as a philosophy of life that is empty deceit which has taken the majority of the people in western society captive. This is one of the great lies of our culture and we are to see to it that we are not taken captive by it.

To be free is to live in the light of the truth – which is the truth is it is in Jesus – the truth about God – the truth about the nature of reality – the truth about what it means to be human beings made in the image of God.

The belief that it is freedom to think whatever we want to think and live as we please is actually slavery. What most of the people in our society think of as freedom is actually slavery.

It is blindness about life and human flourishing. 2 Peter 2:19 speaks of false prophets who promise “freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption.” Paul’s point in our text is that to embrace any kind of thinking about life that contradicts the biblical teaching about life is to become a captive to false thinking. It is to be in a prison of error.

Those who are not thinking the truth and living in the light of the truth are by definition living in error. They are basing their lives on a way of looking at reality that is false. They value what is worthless and destructive and they despise what is valuable and precious. That is not freedom. It is not freedom to think that man is the measure of all things. It is not freedom to think that there is nothing beyond the physical world. It is not freedom to think that we are the product of evolution. It is not freedom to believe that Allah is God and that Jesus Christ is just another prophet. It is not freedom to believe in reincarnation and in karma. Those who believe these things and any other way of understanding life not based on the Bible are captives to the lies of Satan. They are living in darkness.

It is so important that we see this and not only see it but be passionate about it. Freedom is a much more profound idea than the common idea that freedom is being independent in choosing what to believe and how to live. There is an important place for freedom of religion in society, but there is so much more to the idea of freedom. The Bible has many things to say about freedom and the aspect that Paul is highlighting here is that freedom is living life in the light of the truth as it is revealed to us in the Bible.

Freedom requires living in the light of the reality of God. It rests on seeing all of life in a God-centered way. It requires understanding and living life in the light of the fact that human beings are made in the image of God. It requires living life in the light of the truth about human flourishing. It requires living in the light of the truth about sin and salvation and living life to the glory of God. In biblical terms true freedom means joyfully living as we were created to live to the glory of God. And any way of looking at life that denies reality is untruth and so it means living life according to a false view of reality. It means missing what is most important. It means missing what is truly true and good and beautiful. And so it is a prison in which fullness of life is impossible.

Paul is telling the Colossian believers to see to it that they are not captured by any way of looking at life that is not according to Christ. He refers to the false teaching as “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world...” All of these terms refer to any way of looking at life that is not in harmony with his teaching – the message of the Bible. The false teaching that the Colossians were in danger of being influenced by was a kind of religious teaching. We will consider it in more detail when we consider verses 16-23 which mention at least a few aspects of the false teaching. But it is clear that it was some kind of religious teaching that had elements that contradicted Paul’s teaching or added things that distorted the gospel way of being right with God and living to the glory of God.

For our purposes at this point all we need to know is that it was teaching that was not in harmony with the message that God had revealed to Paul. But the words of our text refer to **any teaching** that is not in harmony with the message that God had revealed to Paul, which for us is the whole Bible. The message of this passage to us is that any way of looking at life that is not founded on the word of God is to be rejected. To embrace any way of understanding life and living life that is not in harmony with biblical teaching is to be taken captive by philosophy and empty deceit.

I will comment on two of the phrases that he uses. He says that the philosophy and empty deceit is “according to human tradition.” It is useful to reflect on the way that Paul and the Bible in general speaks of human tradition. Paul sometimes refers to his own teaching using the term tradition. In 2 Thessalonians 2:15 he writes, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.” A tradition is something that is passed down through time. The revelation of the Bible is a tradition in that it is passed on through time. It is a divinely inspired tradition and it is on a completely different level than any merely human tradition.

There is another way of thinking about tradition positively. The biblical teaching about teaching in the church and sound doctrine uses the idea of tradition without actually using the word. The verse that I already quoted from Titus 1 is important for this idea. Titus 1:9 says of an elder, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Paul also expresses this idea in 1 Timothy 6:20 when he says, “O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you.” It is not only the inspired word of God that is passed down through the generations. It is also the sound interpretation of the word of God as well.

The Bible itself makes a clear distinction between Scripture and any interpretation of Scripture. Only Scripture is God-breathed according to 2 Timothy 3:16. No human tradition is on the same level as Scripture itself. But Scripture itself does recognize the importance of teaching it and so there is a good and necessary tradition of sound doctrine that must be passed on from one generation to the next. That is the thinking behind our confessions. The confessions are not inspired as Scripture is, but they are a summary of what the Bible teaches and are helpful for the process of passing sound doctrine from one generation to the next.

But there are references to tradition in the Bible that are negative as we see in our text. Jesus has some very important things to say about tradition from a negative perspective. In Matthew 15:6 he says to the Pharisees, “So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.” And in Mark 7:7 he quotes from Isaiah saying, “In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” Jesus makes a clear distinction between the word of God and any human teaching. He condemns any human teaching that puts itself on the same level as the word of God.

Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees shows how there is a tendency to view human traditions as having the same weight as the word of God. Sometimes human traditions have the effect of making void the word of God. That

is why it is always important to test all human interpretations by the word of God and to always make a clear distinction between human traditions and the word of God. Human traditions can be good and useful. But they can also be bad and contrary to biblical teaching. A clear distinction between the Word of God and everything else is necessary so that any human teaching is always subject to correction from the word of God.

Another phrase that Paul uses to describe the philosophy and empty deceit that he is warning against is that it is “according to the elemental spirits of the world.” This is one of those phrases that the NT scholars are not sure about. One scholar wrote that the interpretation of this phrase is one of the more difficult problems of the study of the NT. Thankfully not knowing exactly what this phrase means does not hinder our understanding of the point that Paul is making.

The phrase, “the elemental spirits of the world” is always used negatively to refer to false teaching. It refers to ways of understanding the world and life that come from human reasoning that is not based on the revelation of God. Humans are curious creatures. We want to understand the world. And that leads to pondering the nature of things. That leads to thinking about what are the basic properties of the world. The ancient Greeks thought the basic elements were earth, water, air and fire. They were trying to break everything down to its basic parts. The pagan religions also had their theories about the nature of things. They understood reality in the light of a spiritual world behind the observable world.

The phrase “elemental spirits of the world” or “elementary principles of the world” has something to do with this kind of thinking. It is human thinking about the nature of things that is not rooted in Christ. That is what we need to understand. There are still all kinds of thinking about the nature of things that is human thinking apart from Christ. The religions of the world have their understanding of elementary principles. The worldview prevalent in the west that there is nothing besides the material world is a way of understanding reality. It is the human attempt to understand reality apart from the revelation of God in the Bible. And Paul is telling us that we are not to be captured by this kind of thinking. We are not to be captured by any kind of thinking that is not according to Christ.

And then in verses 9-10 he begins to elaborate on why should not be captured by any teaching about life and reality that is not according to Christ. The basic idea is that Christ is sufficient. That is not to say that there is no room for any study of things beyond the Bible, but it is to say that the only way to come to the truth is if it is according to Christ.

First he says, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Listen to the flow of thought here. “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” The reason that we are to see to it that no one takes us captive by false teaching is that “the whole fullness of deity dwells [in Christ] bodily.” The reason that we are to see to it that no one takes us captive by false teaching is that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. Paul is emphasizing both the humanity

and the divinity of Christ here and he is presenting the fact that Jesus is fully God and fully man as the reason to reject any false teaching.

Now what this means first of all is that the key to understanding the world and life and reality is God. Any way of thinking about the world that does not begin with the God of the Bible is false. The world is God's creation. Its meaning comes from God. But secondly, Paul here is alluding to the fact that God has revealed himself through Jesus Christ God-man. John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." The God-man Jesus is full of grace and truth. This is why Jesus later on says in John 14:6 that he is "The way, and the truth and the life."

Jesus is the truth. That statement is so deep that the deepest thinkers in the church have not exhausted it. What we need to know is that all truth is rooted in Jesus because God is the foundation of truth and the fullness of God dwells in Jesus bodily. What this means for us practically is expressed by Jesus in John 8:31, "If you abide in my word ... you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The basic fact of all facts – the ultimate elemental principle – is God – the existence of God and the revelation of God – what he is like. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God and that revelation comes through his word. Everything else follows from that.

And Paul goes on to say in verse 10 "And you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority." Now this idea of fullness here is interesting. "You have been filled in him." As, human beings we are not full. We are not complete in ourselves. There is an emptiness in us that is always longing to be filled. That is true in every area of our lives. We are always needing something: food, drink, relationships, love, meaning, satisfaction. We are incomplete in ourselves. We are always needing more. We have satisfactions but they are never complete. We always get hungry again. We always need more of everything. There is always emptiness needing to be filled.

And Paul is saying here of believers that "[Y]ou have been filled in [Christ.]" All our emptiness and neediness is filled by Christ. Jesus said in John 6:35, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." In Christ all our needs are met. All our wants are satisfied. We have been filled in Christ.

Paul in Ephesians 3:19 prays that the Ephesians might "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [they] might be filled with all the fullness of God." As human beings made in the image of God we are designed to be satisfied by loving and worshipping and serving God and by being loved and cherished by God and it is through Jesus that that happens.

Paul finishes his thought here by saying Jesus is the "head of all rule and authority." Again it is necessary to understand this phrase in the flow of thought. See to it that no one takes you captive by false teaching "For in

[Christ] you have been filled” with the one “who is the head of all rule and authority.” Don’t succumb to false teaching because Jesus is the head of all rule and authority.

The point here is that Jesus is over all. He rules over all. And life is about him. Therefore any kind of teaching that is not in harmony with his teaching is to be rejected as harmful and of no value. Christ is sufficient. The good news of salvation in Christ that Paul preached and that is preserved in the NT is sufficient and cannot be improved or added to. Any change is a distortion and harmful.

Everything that we need is found in Jesus. And Jesus comes to us in the Word of God because he is the Word of God. The way of salvation through believing in him is exactly what we need. The transforming power of his life in us through the Spirit is exactly what we need. The call to obedience motivated by love and thanksgiving is the way of life and blessing. The description of the life of love that he calls us to live is exactly what we need to know in order to live a life that is pleasing to him.

There is nothing that can be added. There is nothing that can be changed. Anything in anyway contrary is a distortion and a captivity. Jesus Christ and the way of salvation and life that comes to us in the biblical gospel is true fullness and freedom and any other way is emptiness and captivity. Let us then grow in our knowledge of the truth as it is in Christ and let us see to it that we are not taken captive with any teaching that is not according to Christ.