



Growth Sheet

Complete in Christ

Colossians 2:8-15

Don't Be Fooled: Only Christ Fulfills.

The letter from the Apostle Paul to the Colossians is like an archer shooting an arrow. Putting tension on the “bow” from the beginning of his letter until chapter 2 and verse five, Paul finally releases it in verses 6-7, with this pointed exhortation: “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.” For the rest of the letter, then, we see the path this “arrow” takes. In other words, Paul is showing his readers the *practical outworking* of “walking in Christ.”

To begin with, a person who is walking in Christ must not be enticed to leave the path they started on. Paul was well aware of ideas circulating in the Colossian church—ideas that claimed to lead toward spiritual maturity. The strict rules of Judaism in particular promised spiritual satisfaction and a safe community to those who kept the protocols. To anyone who might be tempted to seek satisfaction in that religion or any other system devoid of Christ, Paul gives this warning in 2:8-15: “Don't be fooled. Only Christ fulfills.” All this is intended to keep our hearts and minds fixed on the treasure we enjoy in Christ.

1. Don't Be Fooled (2:8).

Paul warns his readers against being taken “captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (2:8). As an educated man himself, Paul was not opposed to philosophy *per se*. Rather, he rejected any system of thought that does not have Christ at the center. At best, these systems can provide “a shadow of the things to come” (2:17)—a vague outline, but not the thing itself. At worst, these systems can trick someone into thinking they have found true meaning in life, while failing to bring them into a right relationship with God possible only through Christ.

2. Only Christ Fulfills (2:9-15).

a. Because of *who he is* (2:9).

The reason we should not be taken captive by Christless ways of thinking is this: “in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (2:9; see 1:19). Once we know Jesus Christ, we don't need to look any further for who God or what he is like. As Jesus himself said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

b. Because of *who we are in him* (2:10-15).

The simple fact that Jesus is fully God does no good for a person unless they are “in Christ.” To those who have believed in Christ, Paul can write, “And *you* have been filled *in him*” (2:10,

emphasis added). He goes on to explain what it means to be “filled in him.” To be “filled in Christ” means to have participated by faith in Christ’s death and resurrection (2:12). This is the reason Paul discusses circumcision and baptism. Both are pictures of what happened, spiritually speaking, to a person who believes in Jesus Christ. God has taken the “record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands” and “nail[ed] it to the cross” (2:14). When the forces of evil did all they could to put Jesus to shame, God was putting *them* to shame. Those who are “in Christ” share in Christ’s triumph over sin and death.

Discussion and Application

1. Paul describes a way of thinking here and elsewhere (see 2:21) that could lure his readers away from Christ. These systems emphasize rules and external signs of religious conformity. What do people find appealing about this? In what ways might *we* fall prey to this kind of thinking?

By nature, we find satisfaction in getting a task done and feeling as though we can take credit for doing it. A quick observation of world religions will reveal that humans seem to gravitate toward lists of do’s and don’t’s—even ones that are very strict. We find further satisfaction if achieving these standards brings us into the acceptance of a community whose opinion we value. We can easily fall prey to this way of thinking by forgetting that all our goodness and righteousness comes from Christ. We work from our salvation, not for our salvation. Further, acceptance into the family of God is based on grace, not some level of personal achievement. High standards, while not bad in themselves, always come with the dangers of pride, exclusivity, and self-satisfaction.

2. Notice how many times and in what way Paul uses the phrase “in (or with) Christ (or him).” What does this tell us about the importance of a relationship with Christ?

There is no death to sin, no life, no future apart from Christ. N. T. Wright helpfully explains that “the logic of such constructions is that, when God looks at those who are ‘in’ Christ, he reckons that what is true of Christ (particularly his death and resurrection) is true of them also.”

3. In 2:13, Paul tells us that “God made us alive together with [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses.” What is the connection between being “made alive” and being “forgiven”? What does sin and death have to do with each other (see Romans 6:23)? How should that affect the way we think about sin *now*?

The wages of sin is death; this means that in order to conquer death, sin must first be conquered. This reality should make us resist death and hate it more than we hate any discomfort.

4. Paul pictures the Law as a “record of debt that stood against us” (2:14). Imagine a stack of papers containing a long list of rules you have broken. Now imagine that stack of papers nailed on the cross above Jesus’ head. As your representative, Jesus bore the blame for your failures, and your record is clean. Describe the mindset and attitude of a person who fully believes this. How would such a person regard a system of thought that claims to bring satisfaction apart from Christ?

Such a person would be humble, grateful, and devoted to Christ. As a person in love could not imagine life without their lover, such a person would countenance no system of thought that claims to bring satisfaction apart from Christ.

5. The key to staying on the path of “walking in Christ” is to grow in our knowledge and love for Christ. This is precisely why Paul spends so much of this letter exalting Christ (for example, 1:15-20) What are some practical ways can you remind yourself of what Jesus has done for you throughout the day or week?