

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

Glitter vs. Gold

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

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Colossians 2:6-19

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. ⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. ⁹ For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹ In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, ¹² having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵ And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. ¹⁹ He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

There's an old saying that "all that glitters is not gold". It means that often things aren't really what they appear to be. More specifically, it means that often something that appears to be very valuable and helpful turns out to be worthless. Sometimes there's not much harm in being deceived by the valuable appearance of something worthless. For example, being taken in by the latest fad in nutritional supplements usually isn't harmful, just a waste of money. On the other hand, mistaking something worthless for something valuable can be a matter of life and death. Imagine an explorer lost in the desert and dying of thirst. He's making for an oasis he knows he might be able to reach. But in another direction he sees what appears to be a lake of water in the distance. He struggles towards the vision of cool water over the dunes for hours, only to find more dunes. It was a mirage. He's too far off course to make the oasis, with fatal results. All that shines like water isn't. All that glitters is not gold.

In our reading from Colossians, Paul is warning his readers not to mistake what he calls "**hollow and deceptive philosophy**" for the authentic gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The specifics of this philosophy aren't clear, but it "glittered". It was attractive. Paul says it was based in "**human traditions and the basic principles of this world.**" Traditions are very attractive and comforting to people, and in this case it could have been either Jewish traditions or pagan ones. Either way, they give a sense of mystery. By observing certain traditions you get the feeling of carrying on what people have been doing for generations. The "**basic principles**" of this world translates a term that could mean holy places (temples or synagogues), holy practices (practicing the Law of Moses or pagan rituals) or holy people—teachers, mystics, what we might call "gurus". It could also mean using what were considered the basic elements of the universe in religious or spiritual rituals: earth, air, fire, and water.

All of these elements of what Paul calls "**hollow and deceptive philosophy**" are attractive for the same reasons. For one thing, there's an immediacy in completing a ritual, or going to a certain shrine, or paying to hear teaching from someone. You've done something you can point to. It's almost like consuming a product. On a particular day at a specific time, you go here, you do this, you follow these instructions, and you're promised some spiritual benefit. And of course another attractive aspect of the alternative philosophy is that these things are tangible. You can touch the holy book, or see the idol that's passed off as a god who'll solve your problem. You can hold the offering in your hands, you can smell the incense. You can see the mystic teacher and talk to him and ask him questions face to face. And of course, it's very personal to you. You can mix and match these so-called "holy" places, and spiritual or religious equipment and adapt

rituals. You can choose which teacher to follow. It's a custom-made philosophy, tailored to the individual. As people say today, "whatever works for you."

Over against the glitter of this unknown but attractive philosophy, Paul insists that Jesus Christ is completely and totally sufficient for every need in every dimension of human life. He says, "**8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. 9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10 and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.**" Two weeks ago I reiterated what Paul said in the first chapter of this letter, that the gospel of this wonderful Christ was growing through the Roman world, and that the gospel is what makes human beings grow. Last week Chuck focused on Paul's wonderful description of Jesus in the second half of chapter one. He went through Paul's list of Jesus' attributes: "**image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation, creator of all things, sustainer of all things, head of the Church, the beginning, victor over death, temple of God, reconciler of all things, high priest, and our hope.**" In short, Chuck said, Jesus is "Our Everything."

Contrast that with "**hollow and deceptive philosophy**". Something that's hollow is empty. There's nothing in it. It's deceptive. It may glitter like gold on the outside, but when you open it, there's nothing there. People investigate human spiritual philosophies of all kinds because they're looking for clues to something bigger than themselves. They're looking for what lies behind and under everyday experience, something or someone who can help them make sense of the things that happen in their world, both the good and the bad, the pleasant and the painful.

Philosophies and spiritual rituals, teachers and traditions are attractive because they offer a pleasant or nonthreatening way to make sense of life. You change your diet, or you wear a copper bracelet, or you memorize certain affirmations, or you converse with your angel, or you make a pilgrimage to a spiritual destination. They glitter, but they're not gold, because all that human beings need is in Jesus Christ, "our everything".

All that glitters is not gold; but in the words of J.R.R. Tolkien, "all that is gold does not glitter." The reality of God's own life in Jesus Christ is often much less superficially attractive than all the other spiritual and philosophical pursuits that call to us from the self-help bookshelves and cable TV infomercials. But that's not news. Isaiah prophesied almost 800 years before he was born that Jesus wouldn't be much to look at: "**He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.**³ He was

despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” (Isaiah 53:2b-3) But as Paul says, **“in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰ and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.”**

God has invested his own unlimited power and majesty and authority in a human being. Though Jesus lived in time, and suffered and died in time, in our world, he is from beyond time and lives in eternity. All places, all spirits, all angels, all elements, all the “basic principles of this world” are his because he brought them into being. They are subject to his authority. Human beings don’t need anything or anyone else to complete them than the one perfect and timeless human being, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the pattern of perfection for every person.

Yet he’s not always immediate and obvious, is he? He’s always with us, but he’s not tangible or visible. We live with him and in him by faith, by our trust and reliance on him. He makes himself known in the tangible world around us, and in the elements of bread and wine in communion and water in baptism, but by faith, not by sight. He’s personal, of course. He’s a person and seeks intimate and personal relationship with each of us. But “personal” and “private” are two different things. Jesus is present with us in the persons of other believers, the members of his body, of which he is the head. He comes to us as we come to him in one another.

That’s why in the last verse of our reading Paul points out that the person who is infatuated with spiritual philosophy and spiritual experiences and visions is in life-or-death danger. **“. ¹⁹ He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.”** Paul is using a sobering analogy here. If it’s done properly, any appendage on a human body can be amputated and the person will live. But that’s not so with the head. What Paul means is that losing connection with the Head of the church is certain spiritual death.

And who is this head, Jesus Christ our Lord? He is the one who endured suffering and even death on behalf of people who didn’t deserve it and treated him badly. He’s the one who commanded all his followers to live together in the same kind of love that conquers squabbles, hard feelings, indifference and complacency with the life of the God of the universe. He’s the God who ordains that we grow into our real selves by living together in him in costly love. In a recent interview, Archbishop Rowan Williams summarized Christianity this way:

“Christian faith centres on giving up the claim to be yourself at everyone else’s expense, and on the challenge to find your self or identity in giving and receiving life in community – ‘Take up your cross and follow’, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’.”

The glitter of so-called “spirituality” and “philosophy” promises to enhance and improve us as people, to improve our relationships, to help us get in touch with our authentic selves. But as the Archbishop points out, Christian faith guarantees these things through a way that has no glitter: taking up your cross, dying to your self, your ego, your desire to have your way without paying attention to the Lord Jesus or other people. But it only makes sense that the authentic and true way to become your authentic and true self is through the authentic and only One person who created you—and human nature itself. He created us for relationship with himself and with one another. It’s in these relationships, where we meet the Lord Jesus Christ, the one authentic human being, in one another, that he molds and changes and humbles and fashions us more and more into his image every day.

That is why it is vital that each of us maintain our connection with our Head, Jesus Christ our Lord. Without him, we are a lifeless, decapitated body. We need also to maintain our connection with one another. As members of his body, we need one another because he is in each of us. Let us abandon all hope of becoming the people God created us to be apart from our head, our savior, our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, you became human so that we could be filled with God. Give us eyes to see you in the people around us who are members of your body, to love them with the love with which you have loved us, to accept them as you accepted us. Give us wisdom and strength to serve them, and in serving, to be transformed day by day into your likeness so the world may see you through us, your church. Amen.