

# Christ, the Whole Christ, and Nothing But Christ

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Preacher: Fraser Nicholson

[ 0 : 00 ] Later in our service, Fraser Nicholson, one of our staff members, will be opening God's Word with us, picking up our studies in Colossians. So if you have a Bible, it would be helpful to open that to Colossians chapter 1, and we'll begin our reading at verse 24. Colossians chapter 1, verse 24, reading through to chapter 2, verse 19.

So Paul writes, Colossians 1, verse 24. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body.

That is the church, of which I became a minister, according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the Word of God fully known.

The mystery, hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy, that he powerfully works within me.

[ 1 : 40 ] For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you, and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ.

In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Therefore, as you receive Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

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.

For in him the whole fullness of the world, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

[ 3 : 03 ] In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ. Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith, in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him.

Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival, or a new moon, or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

[ 4 : 35 ] Amen. This is God's word to us. Well, Andrew made a good start on Colossians in recent weeks for us, but we're going to try and pick up the pieces now.

And we're picking up towards the end of chapter one, which is really all about Christ. It's all about Jesus. And that's the good thing about Andrew. He's good for the basics. He's got a good handle on the elementary doctrine of Christ.

But although Paul starts with Jesus in this letter, we've got to move on past the basics, don't we? If we want to grow as Christians, we need to go deeper. Paul speaks about that in these verses, doesn't he?

He talks about having deep roots and growing. So if we want to grow, we need to move on past the basics of Christianity. Paul knows that too, doesn't he? He talks about filling up what's lacking in Christ so the church can grow.

So he's been given this special ministry of God to make the word fully known, beyond just these basics of Jesus. So if you open your Bibles again to Colossians chapter one, hopefully you'll see that everything I've said so far is completely wrong.

[ 5 : 40 ] I hope most of you would have realized quite soon that I was joking and deliberately in error. But actually, perhaps it wasn't quite obvious immediately.

Actually, my error was very Colossian in flavor. Because this is the very sort of error that Paul is writing against. A theology which says that in order to grow, we need to move past Jesus. Practices which say that just coming to church and hearing the same old preacher reading from the same old Bible, that's not good enough. We need more. You need to get into your spiritual rhythms and practices.

You need a new, more impressive preacher. One that's not locked in prison would be a good start. But here's the thing. Very often, the big danger of this sort of theology is that it's not obvious. Actually, it sounds plausible. Look at chapter 2, verse 4. The people who are bothering the Colossian church, they sound plausible. They make reference to the Bible.

[ 6 : 46 ] They use all the right jargon and buzzwords. The statement of faith on their website is sound. It all seems healthy. It all seems good. It looks good. But not only is it plausible so that we don't just dismiss it out of hand, it's also enticing.

Later in chapter 2, in verse 23, Paul says, their practices have the appearance of wisdom. So we need to be real. This stuff does have a real appeal for real believers.

So this is true. How do we then spot the danger? How do we distinguish between what is real, solid, good gospel ministry and this false gospel ministry?

Well, in this section of the letter, Paul is drawing something of a contrast between these two opposites, real Christian ministry and false so-called Christian ministry.

And he shows that real Christian ministry involves sacrificial hard work and it's all centered on Christ. Whereas false ministry is self-centered and hollow, lacking in substance.

[ 7 : 58 ] And if we see this clearly, it helps us to tune our antennae, to spot false ministry. But not only that, Paul also wants to encourage us as Christians in what we have.

To show us that we're not deficient in anything. We're not lacking. In fact, we have already wonderfully been given all that we need in Christ. All that we need to do then is to sit joyfully under ministries which will teach us more about Christ and will help us grow in him.

So let's look first of all at the first section of this section we've looked at from verse 24 of chapter 1 through to verse 7 of chapter 2. And in these verses, Paul is really setting out what real Christian ministry looks like.

And his answer is that real Christian ministry involves sacrificial hard work and real Christian ministry is all about Christ. First of all, notice the language that Paul uses in this section.

Verse 24, he talks about sufferings and afflictions. 29, toil and struggle. Verse 1 of chapter 2, again, struggle. Paul is clear and unashamed that his ministry involves struggle and difficulty.

[ 9 : 16 ] Perhaps there are people in Colossae who are seeking to discredit Paul and his ministry. You don't still align yourself with Paul, do you? Have you not heard what people are saying about him? Do you not know he's in prison?

That's hardly the sign of God's power at work. But Paul's not ashamed of it. In fact, he rejoices in it. And he does so because he has a clear pattern to follow and a clear goal in mind.

Now, verse 24 could be taken in the wrong way, as indeed I did earlier, to say that Christ's own afflictions weren't sufficient for us as Christians. That they need to be somehow topped up a bit by his apostle and his people.

But that can't be true, can it? Christ's suffering and his atoning sacrifice was completely sufficient for our sins. And in fact, later on in this passage, in verse 14 and 15, Paul says as much. The legal demands of our sin were nailed to the cross. They're dealt with. So Paul is not saying here that Christ's suffering was somehow deficient.

[10:20] But rather that now Paul, as Christ's apostle, is following in the pattern that Christ established of being a suffering servant. And this suffering after the pattern of Jesus, it authenticates Paul's ministry.

It points to the fact that it's the real thing. Because notice, Paul's not suffering for himself. Unlike the false teachers, he's not practicing asceticism.

He's not rejoicing in how much pain he gets to endure in some sort of perverse way. No. He says, verse 24, my sufferings are for your sake.

They're for the sake of Christ's body. That is the church. And again, in 2.1, he says, I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you. And for those at Laodicea. And even people who have not even met me face to face.

Just like Jesus, Paul's ministry, Paul's suffering, is not for his own sake, but for the sake of the church, for his people. And we'll see in more detail what the false teachers were all about later.

[11:25] But their ministry was self-serving. They were seeking to puff themselves up, practicing asceticism, thinking that it brought them some sort of self-righteousness or holiness. But that's not real ministry at all.

Real ministry is sacrificial hard work in the service of others. And in fact, Paul says that this is where we really see God's power at work today.

Look at verse 29. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy, that he powerfully works within me. The false ministries which were active in Colossae were making big claims about the power of God at work in their lives, manifesting in things like prophetic vision and worship of angels, all these spiritual sounding things.

But no, that's not what God's power looks like at work. Paul says that the sign of God's power at work is God's people at work.

God's power is seen in God's people and their pastors slogging away in the ordinary business of Christian life and ministry. Preparing sermons, having pastoral conversations, cleaning the church building, setting out the chairs for our services.

[12:46] These are the evidences of God's power at work, the hard work of his people, laboring for the sake of Christ and of others and not for their own glory.

And Paul's not writing here to beat the Colossians up a bit and tell them you've got to get on and suffer a bit more. He's writing to encourage them. Verse 5, he says, he rejoices to see their good order and their firm faith.

And friends, I think we've got cause for thanksgiving too. Because in our church here, almost all of us who are members here are involved in serving in various ways, working hard for the gospel. I actually counted up this week, how many people are involved in our service here tonight? 49 people.

It's not just me standing up the front, it's not just Andrew. It's the musicians, it's the sound team, it's the welcome team, it's people downstairs in Cresce, it's the WeTY team, people doing teas and coffees, people who set the building up. There's a lot of people involved in hard work to make our services happen each week.

[13:53] All of these people laboring and working to serve us and to serve God together. And I'm sure it doesn't feel that glamorous when you're down on your knees scrubbing a toilet.

It doesn't feel very spiritual when you're juggling crying babies in the Cresce room. I can testify to the fact it doesn't feel powerful when you're on the sound desk and things start to go wrong. But be encouraged.

All of this is evidence of God's power at work. All of this hard work going on for other people's benefit. This is what real Christianity looks like.

And it's all essential in the church's mission of proclaiming Christ. And that's the second hallmark of real Christian ministry here, isn't it? It's all about Christ.

That's how Paul describes his role here. Verse 25, I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you to make the word of God fully known. The mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to the saints.

[ 14 : 56 ] And what is that mystery? It's not fancy, super spiritual practices, but Christ. Christ in you, the hope of glory. And so Paul says, Him we proclaim, warning everyone, teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

He says the same thing again in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 2. He wants all those that he is ministering to to reach full assurance and understanding of God's mystery, which is Christ. It's in Christ that are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. All of it. Paul couldn't be clearer here, could he? Real Christian ministry is all about Christ.

It's not about new practices. It's not about speaking in tongues. It's not about outward signs of holiness or self-righteousness. It's Christ.

Christ. The whole Christ. Nothing but Christ. And again, the language here is important. Paul uses language of fullness, mystery, glory, wisdom, riches, knowledge.

[ 16 : 07 ] And I think here, Paul is deliberately reclaiming the sorts of language which the false teachers would have been using. You can imagine the sort of things they might have been saying. We can lead you into a fuller relationship with God.

We can help you unlock mysteries of God that you've never seen before. We can bring glory now. We can give new wisdom and knowledge. Actually, during the course of this week when I was preparing this sermon, I saw a number of adverts online for a course called The Art of Teaching run by John Mark Comer and others.

And the hook on the advert said, frustrated by blank stares from the pulpit. And I thought, yeah, I've seen some of those before. There's maybe a few tonight. So I read on.

The tagline said, meet God in the quiet. Speak with power in the pulpit. Interesting. Sounds good. So the blurb goes on. Unlock the secrets of powerful preaching.

Whether you're a pastor or teacher, this masterclass will elevate your ability to inspire and influence others. With over 100 years of combined expertise, our instructors offer lifetime access to a treasure trove of wisdom.

[ 17 : 19 ] Sounds good, doesn't it? But do you see how subtle it is? It all sounds good. Meeting with God in this special meditative way.

Speaking with power. Unlocking secrets and inspiring people. Access to this treasure trove of wisdom. Well, by comparison, our plain old sermons seem really boring.

Seem to be lacking something. But what's missing from this advert? Where's the real lack in all of this? There's no mention at all of Jesus.

It's not help your church family to grow, to know more of Christ, to become more like him. Instead, it's inspire and influence people.

The secrets of power and wisdom are not in Christ. They're held by the expert tutors with 100 years of expertise. See, this exact same sort of teaching is alive and kicking today.

[ 18 : 29 ] It comes at us in so many forms. It's anything which makes out that Jesus isn't enough. So it could be charismatic theology that wants to add on visions and prophecies and exciting spiritual experience.

Or it could be uber-reformed theology that says you need to memorize Calvin's Institutes, recite it backwards in the original language while standing on your head before you can even hope to call yourself a real Christian.

Anything that makes out that Jesus isn't enough. Anything that makes out that just being a mere Christian isn't good enough. Now, when we state it like that, it seems obvious, doesn't it?

We wouldn't go in for that sort of thing. We wouldn't fall for it. But I think if we're honest with ourselves, we can see there's an appeal there. The subtlety of it can really draw us in, especially even if our motives are in the right place.

I really do want to improve my Bible teaching and my preaching. So there's an appeal there. I'm sure we all want to grow in our faith and to understand more about Jesus. We don't just want to plod along, stagnate.

[ 19 : 40 ] We want to grow, develop, learn more, and that's good. But it makes the danger of this sort of teaching all the more potent. Because here are things which really do have the appearance of wisdom.

It's exciting. It's visible. But Paul here is reclaiming the language to show us, to show the church that all of these promises, all of these promises that the false teachers are making are actually already ours in Christ.

We are not the ones that are lacking anything. He takes all of this language of wisdom and mystery and power and glory and hope and riches and knowledge and shows how it all finds its fulfillment in Christ.

It's Christ who is the center of Paul's ministry, not special practices or feasts or fasts or anything like that. It's Christ. And so this is the test of a real Christian ministry.

Is it one that's rooting you further in Christ? Is it knitting the church together more and more in love? Is it teaching you more, more about Jesus? Now this doesn't mean that every sermon each week has to be exactly the same.

[ 20 : 52 ] I think it was Spurgeon who said of many up-and-coming preachers that 10,000,000 are the texts, but all their sermons won. Well, that's not what Paul's advocating here at all. That sort of preaching just has too narrow a view of Jesus, of his gospel.

But the picture that Paul's painting here, it couldn't be bigger, could it? So yes, all of our Bible teaching on Sundays and in growth groups and midweek and in junior church, everywhere in church life, it'll point us more and more to Jesus.

But in him are all the treasures, all the riches, all the wisdom, all the knowledge, all of it. And we will never exhaust those riches. We'll never, never get to a point where we know it all.

But rather, as we see Christ in all his glory, shown to us throughout the Bible, in songs and stories and poems and prophecies, we'll just grow more and more to love the Lord.

In the Christian life, the way in is the way on. Whether you've been a Christian for one year, or if you've been a Christian for a hundred years, you will not and have not and cannot ever exhaust the riches of Christ.

[ 22 : 07 ] So it's not, give me the new, new insight, but it's tell me the old, old story. It's not more about fasting, more about speaking in tongues.

It's more, more about Jesus. That's the way to grow. And friends, I know we all have ups and downs in the Christian life.

There are times when we're really enthusiastic about church, times where we just want to learn more and grow. But there are also slumps when we just feel lacking in oomph. I certainly experience those myself.

But when I do, one of the best things that we can do in those situations to get out of those slumps is to just dwell on the wonder of Christ, on the wonder of who God is.

One of our recent Tron reads was 12 Things God Can't Do. And as I read each chapter, I was just reminded of how amazing God is. As Josh has been preaching through Luke in recent weeks, time and again, I've come away thinking just, wow, Jesus is amazing.

[ 23 : 09 ] And it's so encouraging. This is the best way for our church to grow and to withstand attacks, to withstand false teaching of every kind, to recognize real ministry, to listen to good Bible teaching, and so to put down deep roots.

That's the response Paul is looking for here. Look at verse 6. As you received Christ the Lord, so walk in Him. Rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith just as you were taught.

Do you see his two emphases again? Stick with the pattern of ministry you've had from the beginning and grow in Christ. Remember what Epaphras labored so hard to teach you.

Remember what I, now Paul, am laboring to teach you. See all of our hard work on your behalf. Root yourself deep in the Word of Christ. That's how to withstand attacks.

Now I'm not much of a gardener and if your garden's anything like mine, it's full of weeds. But now I think it's okay. We just call it a rewilding project and it's good for the bees and everyone's happy. But it's not that I haven't tried to get rid of the weeds.

[ 24 : 25 ] I have. I've tried using my hands and pulling them out. I've tried weed killers. I've tried tools. But whatever I try, they just come back. I can't get rid of them for good.

And Fred, Paul wants us, in this respect at least, to be like the weeds. We need to put down deep roots so that when we do face suffering, when we do face attacks, we're able to withstand it. We're even able to come back stronger from them. We're able to keep going and we're able to keep growing in Christ. And brothers and sisters, we are so privileged here, aren't we, to be part of a church which is practicing this.

Sure, we're far, far from perfect, but what a joy to be part of a church where Christ is proclaimed every week, where our ministers do labor and toil for us to teach us and serve us, where we do have a church family who are knit together in love, that's a wonderful thing.

Maybe you're here tonight and you're just dipping into church. Maybe you've been here a while without really committing or bouncing around churches looking for the one that's just right for you. Well, if that's you, Paul's message here is you need to find a church where the ministry looks like his, where it's characterized by sacrificial hard work, where the preaching is centered on Christ and stick with it.

[ 25 : 51 ] Get plugged in there, start serving, grow. Now, that could be here. It might be another Bible teaching church. That's fine. But if you want to grow as a Christian, if you want to be established and rooted so that you can withstand attacks, you need to be plugged into a good church.

Be thankful for the church that you have. Get stuck in in service there and keep growing. Well, as we look on now to the second section of this passage, we see how Paul contrasts his real ministry with the false ministry of the false teachers.

And he's showing us here that false Christian ministry is all self-centered and hollow and it pulls us away from Christ. And we begin to see here more detail of the kind of ministry which is going on in Colossae.

verse 8 says they're seeking to take people captive with philosophy and empty deceit. It's all based on worldly human tradition and crucially, not according to Christ.

And later in verse 16, we see the sort of things they're doing. They're fixated on issues of food and drink and signs of circumcision, festivals, feasts, Sabbath, angel worship, visions, and on and on and on it goes. Now these things might sound far-fetched to us.

[ 27 : 07 ] We might wonder how could this ever be an attraction for us? What's the appeal? What's the danger? Well these things, food and drink laws and Sabbath practices, circumcision and so on, these are visible, tangible things, experiential things, things that we can do ourselves.

You can quantify these things. How many times a day do you pray? How many times a week do you fast? How many theology textbooks have you read this week? How many times have you had visions from the Lord this month?

Whereas, growth and maturity, being knit together in love, assurance, how do you quantify these things? How do you measure the growth?

And I think there's part of us which pines for these tangible markers, these measurable markers.

And it could come from an honest desire to want to grow. Or, maybe underlying it all is really a lack of confidence that Jesus really is enough.

Could it be that God's grace is just too good to be true? Does God really just offer us forgiveness with no contribution at all from us? That maybe Jesus is the main bit, but just a little bit from us.

[ 28 : 30 ] Or, maybe it's just a lack of excitement. Maybe you've been plodding along week after week, involved in the same ministries for years, coming to the same church for decades. It could be tempting to look for more excitement, to look for visions and prophecies and speaking in tongues.

That looks exciting. It looks spiritual. The ordinary Christian life just seems so dull by comparison. So boring. I wonder if you've ever had the experience of speaking to someone, another Christian, maybe an old friend from a while back, maybe someone you meet at a conference or a CU event. And you ask how things have been going recently and they say things like, oh, my relationship with the Lord has just been so good recently, so rich. I really feel him speaking to me. Actually, it's really only since I started the spiritual discipline of fasting that I have really begun walking in step with the Spirit.

Oh, and it's wonderful at church. Our pastor is such an anointing, so powerful. We're seeing dozens of people coming forward every week to be healed and baptized by the Spirit. And when they ask you the question in return, you're almost embarrassed to say you've been really encouraged because your growth group understood the passage in Haggai this week or that one of your colleagues came along to the life course for the first time.

it feels so flat, so ordinary, so small. And so you can see, can't you, how these things can be discouraging.

[ 30 : 03 ] It makes Paul's version of Christianity just feel like level one, just like the way in. But look at how Paul responds here to expose how hollow this false ministry is and to show the Colossian Christians that in Christ they lack nothing.

Look at verse 9. In Christ, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily and you have been filled in him.

Now Paul couldn't be more emphatic here, could he? To say the whole fullness is somewhat redundant because he's really saying the same thing twice. You can't just have a bit of fullness. It's either full or it's not.

But Paul is emphasizing his point. Christ is the whole, complete, comprehensive, all-inclusive, 100% fullness of God. And not only that, you have been filled in him.

Not you're almost there, doing well, just a little bit more to go. No, you've been filled. There's nothing lacking. Nothing. Oh but Paul, what about circumcision?

[ 31 : 13 ] I've heard that if you're really one of God's special people, if you're really committed to God, you'll be circumcised to set you apart. They even showed me it in the scriptures. No, says Paul, you've been filled already.

Circumcision was a physical sign, but the spiritual reality is already yours. When you were baptized, all that that sign of circumcision pointed to became yours. You were marked out as one of God's people.

And more than that, your baptism was a sign also that you've been baptized into Christ's death. In a real sense, you were buried with him to new life. You were buried with him and since you were buried, you were raised with him.

Raised to new life. Raised from the death of life and sin and born again to new life in him. These guys might speak about power, but what could be more powerful than the powerful working of God who raised Christ from the dead?

The power that has raised you to and made us alive together with him. Wow, great, that sounds good. But what about the sins that I commit now?

[ 32 : 23 ] Have they been paid for by Christ's death all those years ago? Would it not just be more on the safe side if we did a bit of the food laws? We practiced a little bit of asceticism just to be sure.

No. Look how emphatic Christ's victory, says Paul. Verse 14. All our trespasses are forgiven. He cancelled the record of debt which stood against us with all its legal demands.

He has nailed it to the cross. There is nothing more we need to do. All our sin, all our shame, all our guilt, all our fear, all of it, Jesus bore and carried it to the cross.

And as surely as those nails were driven into his hands, so surely has he driven out the rulers and authorities of this present age.

Christ has triumphed. It is finished. Friends, if this is what Christ has done for us, if this is who Christ is, what could we possibly lack?

[ 33 : 36 ] What could we be missing out on as Christians? What could we gain by messing around with things like angel worship and visions and spiritual practices?

What could we gain by strict Sabbath keeping or hours on end of pious prayer and empty phrases heaped up time and again? Verse 17 says, these things are just the shadows.

The substance is Christ. All of these extra things, all of these things that we add on top will only serve us to pull away from Christ, to diminish our trust in him, to diminish our trust in the sufficiency of his work on the cross.

The false teachers can make us feel like we're really just lacking something. But Paul's saying here, ultimately, they're the ones who are missing out.

We're the ones with the substance. They're the ones in the shadows, practicing things which belong to another age. It's Christ who is the head of the body.

[ 34 : 48 ] It's in him. It's by holding fast to him that we are nourished and knit together in love and given growth from God.

Anything, anything at all that we try to add ourselves only serves to diminish Christ and what he's done, to pull us away from him. So, brothers and sisters, don't let anyone pass judgment on you because you're not doing all these extra things.

Don't let anyone disqualify you. Don't let anyone make you feel like you're not a real Christian because you're not practicing these things. Don't let anyone make you feel deficient.

If you have repented of your sin and put your trust in Christ and are seeking to grow more like him, to learn more of him, then you lack nothing.

Nothing at all. There are many temptations out there, many who would seek to discourage us inside the church and outside the church, many who would offer us things which look more impressive, which sound more spiritual, but that's not how the body grows.

[ 36 : 16 ] the body grows as together we hold fast to Christ, who is the head, from whom we are nourished and knit together with a growth that is from God.

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, how we thank you for all that is ours in Christ.

Thank you for his complete sufficiency to deal with our sin and to bring us into union with you. So help us, Lord, to walk in him.

Help us to put down deep roots. establish us in our faith. Guard us from error. Keep us through persecution until that day when we will see Christ in all his glory.

[ 37 : 27 ] And in his name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. unto B