

Translated Into His Kingdom

What does it mean for us to be a “Christ-centered People?” The obvious answer is to be people whose life is centered on Christ. You often hear people say how important it is to be “centered.” It's a popular term among people who practice meditation, to be “centered.” One new age blogger who refers to herself as a “holistic healer” wrote something I thought was interesting. *Being centered means having a reference point, a place to come back to when life and stress push you off balance. Think about those wobbly toys kids play with; you knock them down they bounce right back. They have the balance we wobbly humans wish we possessed! They have a strong sense of what their “center” is; they effortlessly go right back to it, no matter how many times or which direction you push them. Being centered is that kind of dynamic balance point. It doesn't mean we are always there, it means we always know where to go back to. Kind of like knowing where home is.*

I'm not into Ms Robin's meditation, but I actually kind of like her idea of knowing where home is. She and I would likely disagree on where “home” is, one can't be centered unless one has a strong sense of where home is. And I fear even those of us who call ourselves Christians may not be centered on, our home may not be Christ. It is so easy to place other things, usually good things, at the center of our life, our family, our work, our health, our fulfillment. Good things, but notice what is in every one of those phrases, the word “our” which is plural for

“my” which is another word for “self.” Even good things become selfish things when they replace Christ at the center of our lives. Sometimes we think we are Christ centered when we center our life on religious things; but being Christ centered is not the same as being church centered, or worship centered, or evangelistically centered, or helping our neighbor centered, or morally centered, or doctrine centered or even Bible centered. All of these should be important parts of our life, but the reason even our religious activity cannot be the center is because all our “religious” activity makes no sense without Christ. In fact, without Christ at the center, our religion can become a kind of idolatry. Paul understood that better than most. In a few weeks Shawn will be leading us in a study of Philippians. I want to steal one sentence from that book to make my point today. Paul defined the center of his life when he said *I want to know Christ*. Paul knew what it meant to be religion centered. After meeting Christ he wanted to be Christ-centered and we need to want that too. So, what does that mean. More than can be addressed in a single sermon or series of sermons. But we can begin to address it and that's what we want to do in this series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Colossians. I think Paul's purposes in this letter is to help us understand what it means for Christ to be the center of our lives. After a brief introduction Paul begins to identify his message beginning in verse 9. Lets begin reading there.

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (1:9-15).

This morning I want to focus particularly on those last two verses about two kingdoms or dominions, the *Kingdom of light or the Son* and the *dominion* (another word for kingdom) *of darkness*. Christ often spoke of this world as made up of two opposing kingdoms; both in the world, one “*of the world*” the other not. The kingdom “of the world” is a kingdom governed by Satan. In John 12:31 Jesus refers to Satan as the “Prince of this world.” Paul tells the Ephesians that Satan is the ruler of the kingdom of the air and the lifestyle of those in Satan’s “kingdom” is disobedient to God’s moral law. They are governed by the cravings of their sinful nature. The apostle Peter warns us, *Do not be at home in this world* (1 Peter 2:11). The apostle James says, *Do not befriend the world* (James 4:4). Paul tells the Corinthians *Do not accept the wisdom of the world* (1 Cor 1:18-21; 2:6-8) and

to the Romans *Do not conform to the pattern of this world* (12:1-2). The apostle John warns *Do not love the world* (1 John 2: 15-17) and goes on to say this world is *under the control of the Evil One* (5:19).

The idea of the Greek word in each of these passages for world, *kosmon*, is not the good gifts in this world that God created and gave us to enjoy; but the world we create when we are controlled by these good things, whether pleasures, possessions or power, and we ignore or willfully disobey God's commands on how his gifts are to be enjoyed. And what makes these worldly attractions particularly troublesome to us is that the Prince of this world is able to manipulate them and us in such a way to make the illicit and immoral lifestyle attractive to us. Satan's influence permeates the world through different voices, influences, systems, institutions, philosophies all of them doing what he did in the garden, taking the very gifts God gave to delight us and making those gifts gods that destroy us, gods that take us captive into Satan's kingdom, the dominion of darkness. To be Christ centered is to seek first Christ's kingdom and to be able to recognize the difference between that kingdom and the kingdom of the world. The Apostle John describes the problem this way.

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that

Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. (1 Jn 4:1-6)

Each of these two kingdoms has its own point of view, a worldview. A worldview is essentially one's basic beliefs about the world, our answers to the basic questions of life: Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? How should we live? To be Christ-centered is to have a radically different worldview from those in the world and of the world. Christ says *I am not of this world* (John 8:23). *My kingdom is not of this world* (John 18:36). *I have overcome the world* (John 16:33). In his prayer to the Father in John 17 he prays that the same should be true of those who follow him. *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world* (13-18).

So the scriptures speak of two very different kingdoms existing side by side in this world which creates at least two problems. First is the problem of persecution. This was a great problem for first century Christians, but it was not the main problem Paul was concerned about for the Colossians. Paul's concern in Colossae wasn't so much the persecution of Christians as the perversion of Christianity. The Colossian church was struggling to remain Christ-centered rather than letting other things be added to Christ as equally important, things that would enhance Christ, provide what Christ did not provide. The danger was that the Colossians might develop a strange hybrid of Christianity plus!

Remember, at this time Christianity is barely 30 yrs old, even younger in Colossae. Quaker Avenue is older; we are 70 this year. To those in Colossae and the Empire, Christianity is a small, insignificant religion surrounded by scores of ancient religions and philosophies: all the traditional Graeco/Roman gods, the mystery cults like Egypt's Isis, Phoenicia's Astarte, the Greek's Bacchus, and Phrygia's Cybele. There were astral religions based on Babylonian and Egyptian astrologers. There was the practice of magic and belief in the Fates. There were the Greek and Roman philosophies: Stoicism, Epicureanism, Cynicism, the Sophists and the fathers of philosophy, Plato and Aristotle. And of course don't forget all the Jewish sects that were scattered throughout the empire: the Pharisees, Zealots, Essenes, Hellenists and on and on it went.

Paul states his concern most clearly in the second chapter. *Let no one be deceived by fine sounding arguments. See to it that no one takes you captive with deceptive philosophy.* These Christians had been rescued from the kingdom of darkness. To avoid their being recaptured, Paul teaches them basic Christianity, the distinctive truths of Christ and the truths about Christ, the Christian Worldview.

Make no mistake. Our world is profoundly different than first century Colossae! In the first century the Kingdom of Christ was essentially unknown. There wasn't a church on every street corner, not even in every city. Historians tell us there were about 13-20 million people in the Asian part of the Roman empire, by the end of the first century there were perhaps as many as 10,000 Christian, about 6 out of every 10,000 people (Robert Wilken, 2012). The tri-city area of Colossae, Laodocia and Hierapolis was probably close to a million people. How many Christians there, 100, 500, 1000? There couldn't have been more than that, at the most one out of every 1,000. To put that in context, it would be like having less than 250 Christians in Lubbock county. The kingdom of heaven was growing like Jesus said it would, a little yeast spreading throughout the dough, like the smallest of seeds, mustard seed, growing into a great tree.

Today almost 3 billion people profess Christ, 30% of the world. In the USA there are almost 250 million professing Christians, almost 80%. In Texas there are 24 million professing Christians, 94% of Texans. And Lubbock has the most

churches per capita than any city in the Nation!!! Our country, our culture our way of life has been predominantly shaped by men and women who shared some version of a Judeo-Christian belief system or *worldview*. We have grown up in an incomprehensively different world than our Colossian brethren. We don't have a clue what it was like to be a Christian then.

But there are growing similarities. Our nation is becoming more diverse. Even in Lubbock we see Buddhists and Baptists, Muslims and Methodists, Confucians and Campbellites shopping, working, living alongside one another. Our street corners have temples and mosques alongside synagogues and churches. Our bookstores have expanded the religious categories to accommodate the diversity. Schools at every level include teaching to raise awareness of the growing diversity of worldviews now sitting side by side in the classrooms.

According to the *Encyclopedia of American Religions* there are 1600 religious groups in America, 44% of these groups are non-Christian, 50% begun since 1960. The editor states, "America now has a greater diversity of religious groups than any country in recorded history!!" And the religious belief system that is growing fastest in America is "no religion." Several worldviews compete for a place in the theological marketplace of America.

With differing worldviews come different ideas about right and wrong; different answers to basic questions about the purpose of life, the nature of man,

the meaning of marriage, which makes it increasingly difficult in our country to reach consensus on questions that at one time most people pretty much agreed on.

And so in some ways we are facing similar problems as did our Colossian brethren. As Christians we may even face some persecution. Though we face nothing like they did, there is a disturbing trend of Christians being criticized more today because of their exclusive claims about Jesus. But persecution, though not something we want, usually results in purifying the church. Far more worrisome than the persecution of our faith is the perversion of our faith.

Today, if we would genuinely be a Christ-centered people, we must take care not to mix our faith with the increasing amount of non-Christian and even anti-Christian ideas and beliefs and values in our world. We must be sensitive to the problems of not only being in the world, but being *of the world*, conforming to the pattern of this world, rather than the pattern of Christ, accepting the wisdom of this world, rather than the wisdom of Christ, becoming too friendly to this world and thus becoming an enemy to Christ, growing too at home in this world rather than longing for the home Christ is now preparing and will one day bring. We must take care that our worldview is Christ-centered, shaped in us by the Spirit of Christ within us, the Body of Christ around us, both helping us to understand and practice the Word of Christ revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. Today, if we neglect to

continually nurture our relationship with Christ through the Spirit, the Body and the Word, it's a good bet we will not be a Christ-centered people.

If the only study of the scriptures we engage in is listening to sermons on Sunday, we probably do not have a Christian worldview. If we spend more time listening to Hollywood than the Holy Word, we probably do not have a Christian worldview. If we are more familiar with ABC, NBC or even EIB than with the NIV, the RSV or the KJV we probably do not have a Christian worldview. If we're more familiar with the words of Oprah, Phil and Ellen than the words of John, Paul and Peter, then we probably do not have a Christian worldview.

If we spend more time in the world than in the Word, and if the world we are spending more time does not reflect the Christian worldview, then we cannot assume our thinking is Christ centered! Paul's concern for the Colossians was that they resist the cacaphony of competing voices that called them away from a Christ-centered life. That concern is no less relevant to us today. So, for the next few weeks we will listen to Paul as he addresses some of the distinctive doctrines about Christ and the expected lifestyles of a Christ-centered people. We'll talk about the supremacy of Christ, how he is above all else, the suffering of Christ and how we are called to fill up what is lacking, the sufficiency of Christ, how he is more than enough, the sanctity of Christ and what it means to be a holy people, the society of

Christ and how being Christ-centered redeems our relationships and finally the saltiness of Christ, how Christ-centeredness seasons our conversations with others. I hope you can join us for each one of the studies. More than that I hope all of us, as we contemplate what it means to be Christ-centered, can find our center, our balance, our home in Christ. May we grow in our adoration of Christ and our appreciation of what it means to follow him. As the song we are about to sing so beautifully expresses it,

Christ we do all adore thee and we do praise thee forever.

For on the holy cross has Thou the world from sin redeemed.

Christ we do all adore thee