



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Continue in the Faith

Colossians 1.23 – 2.7

David Anguish

Introduction

In “If,” his poetic reflection on becoming a man, Rudyard Kipling included these lines:

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: “Hold on!”¹

Kipling’s verse reminds us that life’s realities can sometimes beat us down and leave us holding on for dear life, desperate to find some motivation to go on. The encouragement he included in his various letters shows that Paul understood those feelings.

We understand why he would offer that encouragement when we remember his readers’ identities and circumstances. They were adherents of a new faith that, for many of them, made demands on their lives that were 180 degrees from those they had left behind. They were in a minority, misunderstood by neighbors who often reacted the way people who misunderstand often do, fearfully attacking what they do not understand. They also had to learn how to carry on when the newness of their faith wore off.

In the case of the Colossians, they also faced the challenge of dealing with some who were distorting true doctrine, requiring things that would not only lead them astray, but would make their walk of faith more difficult. In response, Paul told them things they needed to stay motivated.

- They had heard “the truth, the gospel,” and begun well in their new lives (Col 1.3-8).
- God would be with them as they applied the teaching they needed to serve well (1.9-12).
- God was the one who had given them their new status with its blessings (1.13-14).
- He had done that through Christ who, because he is preeminent, guaranteed their reconciliation “in his body of flesh by his death” (1.15-22).
- Thus, they were equipped to be “holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (1.22).

Provided they would “continue in the faith” (1.23). The Greek construction (the conjunction *εἰ, ei*, with the indicative verb *ἐπιμένω, epimenō*) assumed continued faithfulness. But it also suggested there were conditions to be met to do so. In our text, Paul shows what is involved.

Understand the Goal: Stability (1.23)

Paul returns to the theme of “the hope of the gospel,” pointing to the teachings that distinguished believers from those of this age (cf. Col 2.8). Whether we will continue to pursue the life associated with gospel beliefs depends upon whether we are fickle or stable.

In verse 23, “stable” (*θεμελιόω, themelioō*), which primarily means, “to provide a base for some material object or structure, *lay a foundation, found*,”⁴² is a perfect passive participle, a form that suggests stability that is ongoing because of a prior commitment to the beliefs that make it possible. It is modified by two words: “steadfast” (*ἐδραῖος, edraios*), or firm, a reference to perseverance; and “not shifting” (*μετακινέω, metakineō*), here in the form of a present participle, indicative of the ongoing nature of stability. All three words are plural in number, suggesting that stability, steadfastness, and not shifting are as much about community as personal commitment.

Know What Being Stable Entails (1.24–2.5)

Referring to his own example, Paul provides a brief, yet comprehensive look at what it takes to remain stable.

First, it involves pursuit of a way of life that goes against the grain of the present age. It is the life of a “servant” (v. 25 NIV; *διάκονος, diakonos*). Jesus defined and demonstrated the meaning of this word as opposite the world’s standard of success in his response to the request for power by James and John in Mark 10.35-45. Notice especially verses 42-45:

⁴² And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant (*διάκονος, diakonos*), ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave (*δοῦλος, doulos*) of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Following Jesus’ example, Paul said he rejoiced in his own sufferings, evidence that he was “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (v. 24). He was not saying he thought Christ’s work was incomplete but was demonstrating the implications of Jesus’ call to discipleship (cf. Mark 8.31, 34-35). As Christ’s body, the church is called to live as he lived, as a community that does not exist “to be served, but to serve.”

As we think about applying this point to our present service, we should begin by acknowledging that our world also thinks in terms of power structures wherein the “great ones exercise authority” (cf. Mark 10.42) and are deemed more important than their inferiors. Most today will not even consider the way of Jesus to be a realistic way to live. As one who was at the forefront of the radical change Christianity brought to the world, Paul’s example, imitating the example of Jesus, should serve to strengthen our resolve to resist the default assumption of our world’s value systems.

Second, it follows from this that to live as servants means that we care most about the way of Christ. The phrase, “for the sake of” (ESV), used twice in verse 24, is a helpful translation of the preposition

ὑπέρ (*hyper*), “on behalf of.” Once again, he shows that he is patterning his life after Christ’s example (cf. Phil 2.5-8), “for the sake of” disciples who were pursuing Christ’s way of life: single-minded and unwilling to be distracted by this world’s priorities (cf. 1 John 2.15-17).

Realizing that this was Paul’s focus makes what he says in verse 29 more credible.

- He said his work entailed “toil” (κοπίαω; *kopiaō*), “to be tired or weary, as the result of hard or difficult endeavor.”³
- He was “struggling” (ἀγωνίζομαι; *agōnizomai*), “to engage in intense struggle, involving physical or nonphysical force against strong opposition — ‘to struggle, to fight’” (Louw & Nida, 496). (Note that the form here is a present middle participle.)
- Translated literally, his toil and struggle were “according to his [Christ’s] energy, being energized in me with power.”⁴

This was Paul’s habit everywhere, as seen in 2.1 where he said he wanted them “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” (my emphasis).

Third, to be stable entails being active in striving for the goal of bringing about maturity in Christ (1.28). Verse 28 is the first of three explicit references to the practice of “teaching” in Colossians (see also 2.7; 3.16). We should not be surprised by this, for references to teaching—as well as Paul’s commitment to the role of teacher—are featured throughout his writings (see Rom 6.17; 12.7; 16.17; 1 Cor 4.17; 12.28; 14.6; Eph 4.11, 21; 1 Tim 2.7; 2 Tim 1.11; et. al.). He understood that teaching is essential to the well-being of the church’s life. His reasons are apparent in his reference to the goal of being “mature in Christ” in 1.28, explained in terms of encouragement, unity, assurance, knowledge, and wisdom in 2.2-3.

In summary, to be stable in the faith involves realizing that the Christ-follower’s way of life, concern for the body, and effort to teach and mature never end. This is so because, in harmony with the themes first introduced in 1.9-11, we are not called to master a set of facts, but to a way of life that helps us keep growing in our knowledge of God.

Understand the Goal of Stability—and Apply It as Necessary (2.6-7).

I repeat Paul’s statement of stability’s goal because Paul did (1.24-26; 2.6-7). Since we understand how easily we can be distracted and diverted from our purpose, we see the need for repetition. Paul wanted the disciples to remain focused on Jesus for the long haul.

But in the context, we discern another reason for his repetition. Many students of Colossians correctly see the beginning of a new section at 2.6. By repeating the goal as he turns to the matter of the “Colossian heresy,” Paul makes his point as practical as he could: the goal for living must be applied to the details of life. In effect, he says, “Colossians, are you facing a heresy and challenges to godly living? Then make sure you do these things.”

- Stay focused on the good news about Jesus.
- Ask what is most important for the sake of the body. Then act accordingly
- Keep teaching Christ and seeking to be and help others to be mature in him.

Conclusion

Paul’s laying of a foundation in preparation for dealing with the details of the Colossians’ situation is masterful. (1) He reassured them about what they had done. (2) He reminded them of the blessings of their new lives, and the insurmountable ability of Christ to sustain them. (3)

He called them to single-minded, 100% committed faithfulness to the things that matter most for life in the new age.

His counsel for them is vital for us: “Continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (1:23).

www.davidanguish.com

Notes

¹ Rudyard Kipling, “If,” *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse* (1943); accessed January 26, 2023.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46473/if-->

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 449.

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. 2d, Accordance electronic ed., version 4.4. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989, 260.

⁴ The Greek phrase begins with the preposition κατά (*kata*); uses the noun ἐνέργεια (*energeia*) and cognate verb ἐνεργέω (*energeō*), translated “energy” and “works” in the ESV; and includes the noun δύναμις (*dynamis*).