

“No to Captivity”

Psalm 29; Colossians 2:8-15

March 13, 2022

It was one of the most amazing turnabouts I’d ever seen. Back when I worked at the church in Mount Holly, we did a children’s night every Sunday. Part of the event was that we served dinner. Most of the time, one of the families of the church made the meal and served it but, every once in a while, we’d just order pizza from Dominos instead. We’d always get like a dozen pepperoni pizzas as everyone seemed to like them. One kid, in particular, loved pepperoni pizza. Claimed it was his “favorite food” of all-time, high praise if you asked me coming from a kid. So, imagine my surprise when, one night, I saw this pepperoni-crazy child deliberately picking the pepperoni off his slice of pizza. It was such an odd behavior from this particular child, I had to ask him. “Why aren’t you eating the pepperonis tonight?” I wondered aloud. “They’re bad for you,” the child flatly declared. And, although I’m sure they’re not the healthiest things in the world, eating two or three a night probably isn’t going to negatively impact your health. We talked some more and it turned out one of his little friends whose parents are vegetarian got into the kid’s ear about how bad pepperonis were. Once that kid got a little understanding of what them being “bad” meant, he piled them all back onto his slice of pizza. He was much happier knowing the difference.

I remember that story because, in a way, that child was held captive by a belief that wasn’t entirely true. It’s amazing how much what we think we know can impact our behavior.

Sometime in the 1900’s, a series of experiments was conducted known as the Milgram experiments. The aim of the psychological tests was to determine just how far the role of authority goes in our lives. So, an experiment was arranged. Two people would be brought into the study, a questioner and a responder. The two were told that they were to be in separate rooms. One, the questioner, would ask a series of trivia questions. If the person got it right, nothing happened. If they got it wrong, the questioner would press a button and an electric shock would be administered. As the responder missed more questions, the severity of the electric shock would be amplified.

So, off the two went into their separate rooms. Connected only by headsets, the two would begin the experiment. Now, lest you worry about the person getting shocked, they weren’t. It was a ruse, that’s why they were in different rooms. But the questioner didn’t know that. And all the things they heard from the other person reinforced the idea that they were actively being shocked. On and on the experiment went. The shocks became so bad that the responder began begging the questioner NOT to apply the shocks. What they found out was that, depending on the level of expertise perceived by the questioner to the scientists running the experiment, that the level of shocks normal people would give other people was extremely high.

Turns out, we’re actually quite malleable when it comes to what we’ll do when we believe something. The Milgram experiments exposed a little insight into our core wiring – we follow authority, even when it conflicts with what we know to be right. After all, it isn’t right to shock anyone to the point of incoherency. But there we were, with people doing it to one another willy-nilly.

So, when Paul says to avoid being taken captive, his advice is good. You’d be surprised at how what we think we know impacts what we do. What Paul is saying therefore in a way is to make sure you know what you think you know. That’s the role of philosophy. The word simply means, “love of wisdom or knowledge” but, whether we know it or not, philosophy plays an outsized role in our culture right now. You might not believe me but, ultimately, politics is an outworking of philosophy. We do certain things, vote for certain people not so much for what they promise us but because, right or wrong, we believe a particular party or candidate shares our world view or philosophy on the world.

Paul is going to warn us about being held captive by what we think we know. In fact, this bulk of this entire chapter is dedicated to the point Paul makes in verse 8 – a warning not to be held captive. And we shouldn’t miss the set up. Either one is held captive by philosophy and empty deceits OR one is in full accord with the wisdom of Christ. What Paul is saying here is that the world around us has a way of deceiving us. And we shouldn’t miss that. Because what Paul was concerned about was affecting the church. Calling it “the philosophy” and an “empty conceit” Paul is referring to some particular beliefs that were beginning to affect the church. The most likely culprit was an attempt to pervert the simplicity of faith in Jesus with a more complicated belief system.

Two groups stood to challenge faith in the Lord at the time. The first were what's become known as Judaizers. These were Christians who believed that the old laws of sacrifice and purity were still required by faithful Christians. Their beliefs were set up to see Christians behave like faithful Jews with dietary laws and cleanliness requirements. Paul rejected that belief, finding what Christ has done sufficient for the work of atonement. This is what Paul points to immediately in an indirect fashion immediately following his verse on not being held captive. The reason you're better off not being held captive by bogus philosophy is that, in Jesus, the fullness of God dwells.

This is a BIG CLAIM y'all. What Paul is saying is that the fullness of an incomprehensibly large God is held within the person of Jesus Christ. That, my dear friends, makes Jesus the only authority worth listening to in all of this broken world. In HIM, the fulness of the deity dwells. And one interesting corollary principal one can extrapolate from that is that, if the fulness of the deity dwells in him, there are simply no other gods, no other divinities, no others at all.

There is a particularity to Jesus Christ. TO accept Him is to accept no others as co-equal. That means while I can appreciate that other people hold other beliefs on God, I can live with them peacefully as well without being a jerk BUT, I DO BELIEVE THEIR beliefs wrong or incomplete. Further, if I love them as I am called to do, that means I want to tell them about Jesus. Not offensively, not standoffishly but rather correctly, truthfully and lovingly.

Why? The fullness of the deity dwells in Him. There is sufficiency in knowing Jesus in a way that is actually empowering. It gives you power because it leaves you free to think and act in ways free from the tyranny of philosophy. You are able to do so, because of something though, that's what Paul tells us next in Colossians. Avoiding empty deceits and bad philosophies isn't so much a function of what we've read or what we know, it is instead avoided because of what Jesus Christ has done.

First, Paul points out that we've been "Filled" by the same power. That, in our conversion to Christ, we've been filled up by the Holy Spirit. And not only have we been filled; we've also been spiritually circumcised by Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit through our baptisms. There, at the font, we were made dead to sin and death and raised alive in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our baptisms thus serve as the power of God behind our ability to avoid the empty deceits and philosophies of this world.

This power of God, the power that raised Jesus from the dead, has done something – it's cancelled the record of your debt. This is an important reference to understand, this "record of debt." You see, back in Roman times, there were debtor's prisons. That is to say that if you went bankrupt, instead of facing the difficulties of that, you were instead imprisoned until your debt was paid off. TO that end, above your cell back then would be posted, you guessed it, the record of your debts. See, someone could come by, arrange payments for those debts and then you'd be released from prison.

The image is, I believe, a powerful one. What if you and I were imprisoned in such a way. Only instead of our debts posted, so much from Citibank, so much for a mortgage, etc., it had a list of our sin. My goodness, how long would that scroll have to be. I don't know about you, but I've got a rather lengthy track record of sin in my life. All I'm saying is that record of debt would be a lengthy one. Would yours be any shorter? Probably not. There it would be for all to see.

Except it's not. Long before you and I were born, Jesus Christ came into the world. Even though the fullness of the deity would dwell within Him, Jesus chose not to come into His world as a conqueror or a king or even a rich man. He instead chose to come a lowly servant to all of mankind. A man acquainted with sorrows and sufferings. HE dwelled among us, calling together a collection of men and women and teaching them all about what He had come to accomplish. But, in the end, Jesus was here to do something. To make atonement for us. To go into the debtor's prison and remove the record of debts from every single one of our cells so that we could walk into the world, free yet again.

In Galatians 5, Paul declares this "*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*" It is a similar declaration to what we've heard from Paul in Colossians. That what Christ has accomplished for us does not need to be undone. We are free. Free from sin. Free from death. Free from empty deceits. Free from bad philosophies which keep us shocking our brothers and sisters in Christ for no good or apparent reason.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.