

Seventh Summary of the New Testament Colossians and Philemon

Colossians is a phenomenal book when it comes to a couple of key things: 1) On the elaboration of the PERSON of Jesus Christ (who Jesus IS); and 2) On the corrective teaching against early forms of gnosticism.

First, carefully consider the clear revelation on who Jesus is. Col. 1:15: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." It is very important to be aware of the meaning of "firstborn." It doesn't mean the first to be physically born from a woman's womb. "Firstborn" in this case refers to a position of authority. Consider the fact that Christ, the Son of God is presented as being at "the right hand of God." The right hand of God is also a position of authority, not a geographical location. Both terms describe the fact that Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, He has the position of all authority and prominence. In Matthew 28, He says, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." That's what it means. That kind of authority belongs to God! Also, Col. 1:16: "For by him all things were created..." Need we say more? Who created all things? Answer: God! Jesus created all things! Who is Jesus? Answer: God! Secondly, having received Christ, we are to avoid "philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world" (2:8). This "pre-gnosticism" that tried to save people with secret knowledge to overcome evil physicality and release their good spirit (a very Greek concept) was something that threatened early Christians. As a result of such deceptive philosophy, St. Paul admonishes them: "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations -- 'Do not handle, Do not taste, do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used) - according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh." (Col. 2:20-23) Here, we are mindful of two kinds of Greek extremes: 1) Ascetic Gnosticism and 2) Antinomian Gnosticism. In ascetic gnosticism, one tried release from the body by rigorous bodily discipline; in antinomian gnosticism, the person just did whatever they wanted with their body, since they believed that the body would just eventually come to nothing. Both abuses could destroy saving faith. One was legalistic, the other libertine. St. Paul corrected both! Finally, there is St. Paul's shortest letter, Philemon. It is also a personal letter to Philemon about his run-away slave Onesimus. As Middendorf points out slavery was something already entrenched in the culture. St. Paul's approach, however, sought to remove the abuses involved in it. You see this in St. Paul's letter to Philemon. St. Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon, but he does so with the report that Onesimus is now a fellow believer. Philemon must now receive him as a "beloved brother" (vs. 16). However, if this is how Philemon receives him, then the abuses of slavery will simply no longer exist. At the same time, Christians are referred to as "slaves" of Christ (Romans 6:22), but we are not slaves under a taskmaster, but in the sense of being bound to God. In this bond, we gladly follow, serve, and obey Him!

Our status as "slaves" represents our longing to be found in Christ. As a result, all relationships change for us now. We have been given everything from God, so we now serve others as servants of Christ (we willingly "enslave" ourselves to our neighbors). This is not a 50-50 proposition for our human relationships (as if we need our neighbors to be kind to us before we serve them), but a new deal; we serve completely because Christ has served us and serves us completely. Life has changed since Christ the Lord of Life lives within us. We no longer "love" people to get something out of them, but because we have already received everything from God. We recognize, however, that the best way to love God back is to love our neighbor. 1 John 4:19 says simply, "We love because He first loved us." *In Christ, Dr. Espinosa*