

MESSAGE OF THE MONTH

Complete in Christ

A readable transcript of a special message from
Stephen Nichols



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I want to spend some time with you in Colossians 2:8–10. I will be reading from the New King James Version. Here in Colossians 2, beginning at verse 8, Paul tells us:

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Our Father and God, we thank You for the gift of your Word. We ask for Your blessing upon us as we look into it and study it. We thank You for the central message of this text, for our Savior, the God-man, and that we are complete in Him. We pray these things in His name. Amen.

BEWARE OF BEING CHEATED

The first thing we see in this text is that Paul wants his audience to be warned. He starts off with the word “beware.” Every time Paul writes, we pay attention because it’s Paul, and ultimately, it’s the Word of the Holy Spirit—but that word “beware” captures our attention, doesn’t it?

Paul has a deep concern for the Colossians. The new King James has another great word here, “Lest anyone *cheat* you.” In the ESV, the word, which is still strong, is “see to it that no one *takes you captive*.” But I like the word “cheat.”

We have our wonderful *Always Ready* events where we spend time with young people. These are twelve-to-eighteen-year-olds, and we help them navigate things they’re dealing with in life. One session we do at virtually every *Always Ready* conference is on the issue of identity.

Identity is a pressing issue, especially for the youth in our day. All of us have seen this sea change that has happened right before our very eyes, even in just the last few years with the push of the same-sex agenda and then with transgenderism.

Naturally, we will turn to a text like Colossians 2 because we have people who are cheated in our day. They are cheated out of their very God-given identity by the same things Paul is talking about in this text. They're cheated through the empty deceit of philosophy. They're cheated through the traditions of men. Paul includes some sarcasm when he calls them "the basic" or "the rudimentary principles of the world." But I think "cheated" is the right word.

THE INFILTRATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL HERESIES

In Paul's day, there were different philosophical issues by which the Colossians were being cheated or being held captive. Those issues largely had to do with Plato. Plato had a complex system but some fundamental ideas, one of which was that matter is inherently and fundamentally bad.

The noble life—we could even use the word *salvation*—according to Platonism, was to escape the material and get to the pure transcendent and immaterial. It's one thing to talk about laws, but we need to pursue pure justice. It's one thing to talk about works of art, works of literature, or plays that may be aesthetically pleasing, but we need to get beyond that to the abstract concept of beauty. Plato and the philosophies that followed in Plato's wake did not have much place for the material, the body, or material existence.

Platonic philosophies had a way of infiltrating the church. It was the atmosphere, if you will, of the first century. Many of the early heresies suffered by trying to marry Plato's false idea that matter is inherently bad with teachings of the Bible. Of course,

once you try to intermingle those ideas or achieve syncretism with those ideas, you're going to end up with something that is not biblically faithful or orthodox in its theology.

The heresies that sprung up in the early centuries had a lot to do with an overemphasis on Plato, but they were present in the first-century church. They were alive in the church before we even get out of the pages of the New Testament. Paul wanted them to see that this was a real threat. This was a real danger. That's why he uses the strong language, "Beware."

Similarly, when we are in front of the youth at *Always Ready*, we want to stand up and say: "Beware, you have a lot of influencers. You have a lot of voices coming at you." In this digital age and the screen culture in which we live, voices are constantly coming at young people and pushing a particular worldview. They're telling them that they are absolutely free to make whatever identity they want. We want to come alongside of them and say, "Beware, don't let anyone cheat you through what are ultimately the traditions of men."

EVER-CHANGING FADS

We know a lot about the traditions of men. One of the things we know about the traditions of men is that they are passing fads. The issues that dominated in the first century are not the same issues that dominated in the tenth century, and they're certainly not the same issues that are dominating in 2024. The traditions of men are ever-changing because there's nothing constant in them. There's nothing absolute in them. They contain agendas that push things, but they're constantly changing, and it's even hard to keep up.

Just think of the change in worldviews over the last decade. I challenge you to think even about the colleges you went to, and now go back and look at those colleges if you graduated

any length of time ago. We don't have to share with each other how long ago we graduated from college—we can keep that our little secret—but go back and remember what you learned. Think about the hot-button issues that dominated when you were there. Then look at your alma mater and see what is being taught there now. We want to stand up. We want to say: “Beware of these philosophies. Beware of these traditions of men.”

Paul takes an abrupt turn with the Colossians and tells them that people are teaching this philosophy, these basic principles that are not according to Christ. He wants them to take their eyes off the horizontal. He wants them to take their eyes off the worldviews and the dominant ideas of the first century and instead lift their eyes and look to Christ.

PAUL'S INCARNATIONAL DEFENSE AGAINST HERESY

The reason that we need to follow after Christ comes in Colossians 2:9, which is one of the most succinct Christological statements in the entirety of Scripture. Here, Paul stresses that Christ is very God and very man, two natures in one person. Paul says, “For in Him”—that is, in Christ, “dwells all the fullness of the Godhead *bodily*.”

That phrase, “All the fullness of the Godhead,” references the divine nature. Then Paul's statement that the Godhead dwells in Christ *bodily* references the human nature. Paul goes right for the jugular of Platonism. Platonism would never countenance the incarnation, the idea of God becoming flesh, but that is precisely the center of theology because the person of Christ is right at the center of the work of Christ. Here, we have the beautiful statement, “In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead *bodily*.” Why should we be living our lives according to the principles of

Christ and not according to the principles of culture? It's very simple: Christ is the God-man and is *not* the traditions of men.

Paul goes on to say something else, and I love the theology of what he says. I love the Christology of it. We could spend all kinds of time exploring the heresies that were cropping up, such as Docetism, which was a sort of generic heresy. It's in the New Testament pages, and the Apostles had to deal with it in the early New Testament church. The Greek word is *dokeō*, which means "to appear." Docetism is the view that Christ only *appeared* to be human because matter is bad and Christ would never take on flesh. So, He wasn't truly human. He appeared to be, but He sort of hovered six inches off the ground as He went through life, and He really wasn't touched by life like you and I are touched by life. In the end, Docetism held that Christ is not truly human, and therefore, He could not be our sympathetic High Priest.

Paul wants to guard against Docetism. He wants to set up a hedge so that doesn't make its way into the church. That's why he again goes right for the jugular and takes it head on: "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." We could keep exploring that statement, but I want to move on to the next verse because it tells us why we should be following after Christ.

THE CHALLENGE OF IDENTITY CRISIS

In verse 10, Paul simply says this: "And you are complete in Him." Now, the ESV words it a little differently. It uses the same word in verse 9 regarding "fullness" and speaks of how we are full in Him and in Him is our fullness. But I love the word "complete." The Greek word is *plērōma*, and it does mean "filled," but it means "filled" like we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

In the Assemblies of God and other charismatic circles, they have a vision of the filling of the Holy Spirit almost as if the

Spirit were a quantity. When you are saved, you get part of the Spirit, but you need to fill up like you would take your car to the gas station and fill up the tank before you embark on a road trip. You need to be full, as in a quantity of the Holy Spirit, to live the “Spirit-filled” life. But I don’t think that’s what this word means at all.

What *plērōma* means is “complete fullness.” The reality is that we either have the Spirit or we don’t. When we are saved, we receive all the Holy Spirit we will ever need because we receive *all* of the Holy Spirit. The word *plērōma* can mean “fullness,” but don’t think of it at all in terms of quantity; think of it in terms of a state of being, and “complete” is the right word.

Here is the upshot of this: if you are a Christian, if you are in Christ, then you have all that you will ever need. This goes back to our *Always Ready* audiences because this is the message that I love to bring to the young people who attend.

Think back to when you were in junior high or high school. For many people, those are challenging years. We have the expression that we’re trying to “find ourselves.” We even see people who seem, to use another expression, “lost.” We don’t mean that geographically, and we don’t even mean it in terms of salvation. We just mean they quite haven’t found their place in the world. They quite haven’t figured out who they are in the world.

In those teenage years, and maybe even the early twenties, we’ve always seen identity crises. For decades, we’ve had challenges with body image issues, especially for females, but not exclusively for females. In my day, in the eighties, it was television commercials and billboards. They would put models on them, but then even the models weren’t good enough, so they would airbrush the models. That put tremendous pressure especially on

young ladies as they were growing up and as they were teenagers. We could speak of it as an identity crisis.

We have perennially seen identity crises, and they've always been acutely felt by teenagers, even regarding issues like simply belonging to a group. You want to be part of the jocks, or you want to be part of the chess club, or you just want to be at the cool table—you know all those pressures. Today, those pressures are so multiplex and much more acutely felt.

We have agendas being pushed on our young people. We had an *Always Ready* event in Canada, just outside of Ontario, where we presented on identity issues. We found out afterward that it's actually a criminal offense in Canada to dissuade a young person from transgender therapy. This is the moment in which we live. This is the moment in which our children live. They have all kinds of voices telling them: "If you do this, then you will find yourself. Do this and you will be complete. Do this and you will find your true identity and have freedom." And it is all a *lie*. It's all, as Paul says, "empty deceit."

We haven't yet talked about the phrase "empty deceit." Paul could have said "empty," and it would've meant the same thing. He could have said "deceit," and it would've meant the same thing. But by putting them together, he's slamming down an exclamation point. These philosophies and worldviews will not bring you contentment, joy, freedom, hope, love, or anything they promise, because they're empty. They're absolutely vacuous; they're hollow. And they're deceptive; they're a lie. We know from where lies originate, so we stand in front of these young people and say: "If you are in Christ, then you are complete and you have everything you will ever need to be happy, content, and at peace with yourself. We find ourselves when we find ourselves in Christ."

CHRIST'S SUPREME RULE

Paul goes on to finish verse 10 by saying that we are “complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.” Sometimes when Paul uses the word “principality,” he’s referencing the transcendent realm, the realm of angels and demons. In Paul’s worldview, demons were a reality and Satan was a reality because demons and Satan *are* indeed a reality. Paul saw firsthand the effect of these principalities. He saw it in the idolatry of the first century. As a result, Paul is reminding the Colossians, who would’ve walked past pagan temples in the course of their daily activities, that those principalities are nothing compared to Christ.

Paul is writing to people living in the first-century Roman Empire, and if there’s anything we know about first-century Rome, it’s that it was drunk on power. It loved power, and it loved the display of power. To be Roman was to display power; it was the definition of power. Rome had conquered the world. If you look at the maps of all the great empires—the Hittites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Mesopotamians, the Medo-Persians, and the Greeks—Rome took over all those areas and more. It was all about power. It was all about statues to the gods and statues to the Caesars.

In the context of Rome, Christians were a marginal group. They were not only marginal in terms of their size but also because of their beliefs. Christians were ostracized by many of those who had positions of power and influence in culture, and Paul is reminding them that despite appearances to the contrary, Christ is over all power.

Whatever it is that could do us in, whether it’s the principalities or the power, Christ is over all of it. He is supreme. That’s the idea Paul is communicating with the term “head.” Christ is supreme over all of it, and all of it is under Him and His rule.

CHRIST: THE ANSWER TO IDENTITY CRISIS

We need to remember that Christ rules over all. We need to remember it because we need to help. You need to help those young people in your life—your children, your grandchildren, and the youth that are in your church. You need to come alongside them and help them as they're trying to navigate this world. Remind them of who Christ is. Remind them of what it means to be a Christian. Remind them of how wonderful it is to have our identity in Christ. Remind them that no matter what this world throws at them as teenagers or in the decades of their lives to come, they have all they ever need as Christians. They need to hear those truths and see them lived out in your life and modeled for them.

But those of us who are no longer teenagers shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that we have this identity question all sewn up. Those of us who are in the various later decades of our lives can still have identity issues. We can still feel the peer pressure. We can still feel like we don't measure up. We can still think, "If I only have this accomplishment, I'll feel that much better about myself."

It's good to set goals and do all those things, and we know that, but it's not good to have our *identity* in those things. We can be very successful at work, and if God gave us gifts and we use those gifts for His glory, that's a wonderful thing. But it can become a bad thing when our work becomes our identity or when our accomplishments at work become our identity.

Sadly, this can even happen with families. Families are a good thing. They're a gift from God. We cultivate them. We love them. We enjoy them. We want to see our family be successful. But some people can make their family their identity. They can make their children their trophies, and that's not a good thing.

Even good things that God gives us can sometimes become bad things if we seek to find our identity in them. None of those things will compare with Christ because none of them are Christ.

Whether we're teens or octogenarians, we still need to be reminded of who Jesus is. He is the God-man, and because He is the God-man, He alone can save us. And if He has saved us, then all the totality of the riches that are in Christ Jesus are ours, and we are in Him. This doctrine that we are complete in Christ is one of the most beautiful doctrines of the Reformation. The Reformers simply called it *union with Christ*. It is at the center of the Christian life, and it is at the center of our lives.

I have really enjoyed this time with you in this text from Paul. As we close, let me again say thank you for being so faithful to us and for standing with us as we seek to disciple the students on our campus in Sanford and as we seek to disciple the nations. Let's close with prayer.

Our Father and our God, we thank You for this text. We thank You for this reminder to beware, to be mindful of the attack that we are under and that especially, sadly, our youth are under at this moment. But we thank You for that towering Savior who is ours. We often look out across our culture, shake our heads, and become filled with anxiety and even anger. But help us to realize that Jesus is far superior and above it all, that He is the God-man, and that we are complete in Him. We thank You for that beautiful truth. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The transcript has been lightly edited for readability.



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