

Living for Christ in a Pagan Culture

A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula

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We are Christians. That means that we are followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus of Nazareth is the image of the living God. Jesus claims exclusive and total rights to our love, affections, loyalties, and obedience. Jesus said that he came down from heaven to do the Father's will and that he always obeyed the Father in everything. Jesus said that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the father except through him. Jesus said that he that knows the son knows the Father and that no one without the son can know the father. Jesus said that if we want to know the Father, then we must accept the son, Jesus.

Jesus died on the cross on behalf of our sins. He was buried and God raised him from the dead on the third day. The fact that Jesus arose from the dead proves his claims to be true. God verifies his uniqueness role as our only savior and Lord. The apostles preached the message of the fact that God loves all men, he wants them to be saved, and he wants them to love and obey him. In their sermons in the book of Acts, the apostles of Jesus went everywhere proclaiming the good news of forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and eternal life through Jesus. They told sinners to accept the Lord of Jesus, to confess him as savior and Lord, and to turn from their sins and be baptized in Jesus' name. Then God would unite them with his spiritual family, the church, which is composed of all of God's children through faith in Jesus.

Paul wrote the letter to the church in Colossae and reminded them of the unique role of Jesus in God's way of saving mankind.

Open your Bibles, please to the book of Colossians. It is on page ____ in the pew Bibles. Paul opens by speaking of their faith in Jesus, their love for one another, and their hope of heaven. In v. 10 Paul begins his prayer for them. He prays that they may be strengthened with God's power to live for Jesus faithfully in their wicked and pagan culture of first century Asia Minor, now in eastern Turkey. In v. 12 he says that they share in the inheritance of the saints in light. In v. 13 he says they have been rescued

from the dominion of darkness and they have been brought into the kingdom of God's dear son, where they have salvation, the forgiveness of sins. Then in v. 15 he goes on to write about Jesus. Here's why Jesus is the savior.

[Read through the verses noting who Jesus is, vs. 15-20]

In v. 21 he speaks of their past [read it]

Then he speaks of their salvation in Jesus [v. 22]

Then he says they need to be true and faithful to the good news of Jesus and not revert back to their old pagan ways [read it]

He goes on in chapter 2 to say that his purpose is that people may know the "mystery of God, even Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." [v. 3]. But there is a danger. Pagan teachers, professors, philosophers, and practitioners are teaching that idolatry, witchcraft, the worship of things and creations and created beings are the way to superior knowledge. These folks come with sophisticated arguments denying Jesus Christ who has come as God's son in the flesh. In v. 4, Paul warns them, "See that no one deceive you by fine-sounding arguments." In v. 5 he says that his concern is that they have a firm faith in Jesus. He says you have become Christians, now live like one. Hear v. 6 [read it]

In v. 8, he refers once more to those arguments of those denying Jesus. Hear him [read v. 8]

Then he goes on to remind them again of their relationship with God through Jesus Christ. [Read 9 and 10]. Jesus is the fullness of God. There is none of God outside Jesus. We live in a pluralistic, multi-cultural world, with many different options for religion and faith. Our city has mosques, temples, synagogues, churches, cults, and all kinds of varieties of religious teachings. In America, anyone can start a church and teach anything they want. The Colossians had options like that too in their world. But Paul says to them: Jesus is the fullness of God. There is no more of God outside Jesus. When you have Jesus, you have everything that God has to offer. Everything outside Jesus is not of God. Now there are truths in other religions, but those same truths are also in the Christian faith. When you have Jesus, you have all the truth and no error. But when you have other faiths, you have a little truth with much, much error. Anything found in any religion that is not also found in Jesus Christ is false and not from God.

Jesus also gives us everything we need. In vs. 11 and 12, Paul writes that our sins have been forgiven because we have been buried with Christ in baptism and raised spiritually to walk a new life by the power of God working in us.

In v. 13, Paul says that once we were sinners. We were without God in this world. We were living in darkness with no hope beyond the grave. Our hearts were evil and full of sin. But when we accepted God's good news of Jesus, then God made us alive in Christ, he forgave us our sins, and he took away all the rules and regulations that condemned us as sinners. The entire list of our condemnations and wrongdoings were nailed to the cross. The cross is where God saves us through the sacrifice of Jesus for us. In another place, Paul says that all our sins were laid on him and God reconciles us [or puts us right with himself] through what Jesus did for us on the cross.

The cross, he says in v. 15, disarms all the invisible, spiritual principalities and powers of the dark side. They are totally conquered and subdued in what God did in the cross and the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul is arguing therefore that the Colossians should no longer be subject to those powers of the dark side, that they should forsake those things, and not let anyone practicing those things condemn them or judge them as though they were out of touch or inadequate. In Christ, as the apostle Peter wrote in his first letter, God has given us all things that pertain unto life and godliness. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote that all spiritual blessings are in Christ. That means if all of them, a-l-l, all of them, not one left one, are in Christ, then there are none anywhere else in anyone or in any system of religion or faith.

So Paul goes on to say don't revert back to human ideas or even teachings of Judaism of the old covenant through Moses that have been replaced by the new covenant in the blood of Jesus. He writes don't let anyone judge you in regard to Sabbath keeping, celebration of religious festivals, or penitence and harsh treatment of the body like fasting, or worshiping spirits or angels. If we do that he says, in v. 19, we have lost connection with Jesus who is the head. This Jesus gives us a relationship with God, with one another, and he gives us spiritual growth [v. 19]. Don't go back and live under the world's rules, its human traditions, its prohibitions, or its traditions because these are nothing but human

commands and teachings. On the surface, they may look wise, they involve feelings, mysteries, elite knowledge so called, but they are not any value in shaping and forming the inner person for God [vs. 20-22].

Paul continues in our chapter 3 to write the positive steps we are to take in our pagan culture [vs. 1-4]. We are to set our minds on Jesus, we are to live for him, and he will take us home to be with him in glory.

In vs. 5-10 Paul writes of the evil things that they are to renounce. Evidently some of them were continuing to practice these things after conversion. They brought their human and pagan baggage with them through baptism into the Christian life. Paul says, “Stop living that way.” Here he condemns lust, idolatry, greed, lying, evil desires, rage, malice, and filthy language because these things belong to the pagan lifestyle, not to the Christian life. We are to put on the new self that looks like Jesus, v. 10, and in Jesus there is no racial, ritual, national, or economic barrier. He says in v. 11 [read it]. Christ is all and in all.

\ As God’s people we are to live holy lives with gentleness, compassion, kindness, humility, love, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. We are to let Christ’s peace rule our lives. We are to be thankful in all things. We are to let the word of Jesus rule our hearts. The word “rule” is to “be the referee or the umpire calling all the plays and shots in our lives.” We are to be filled with the word of Christ. We are to sing and praise the Lord. Everything we do we are to serve God and do it all in the name of Jesus [vs. 12-17].

Paul goes on to write in 3:18 through 4:1 that our marriage relationships, our family ties, and our jobs are to be serving Jesus. All that we do in marriage, in the family, and in our occupations and professions we are to serve Jesus. Nothing, not even our private lives, are excluded from the Lordship of Jesus. We are serving Christ everywhere, all the time [vs. 23, 24].

Paul concludes the body of this letter in chapter 4 by urging them to continue in prayer and to be wise in the way they act around those that are not Christians. Our speech is to always be full of grace and seasoned with the word of Christ, and we are to give answers for our faith from God’s teachings.

Now this is a brief synopsis of what Paul says on how we are to live for Christ in a pagan culture.

Today, all over the world, Christians are surrounded by pagan cultures that promote illicit sex, greed, lying, deceit, the worship of things and created beings, selfishness, hatred, fighting, unkindness, the destruction of human life and moral values, and false teachings and religions. Every Christian everywhere lives in a minority. There are always more serving the world, the flesh and the devil than those that are serving God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The problem today is that many believers are going along with worldly practices and supporting ideas that are totally unchristian. Many believers need to read and heed Paul's message here to the Colossians. The reasons the church in some quarters and among some people has such a bad reputation is that believers themselves are living sinful lives and not serving Christ. The church needs to repent and return to God.

Many believers today are sitting in church pews with their names on church rolls but the other 167 hours a week they are living for themselves. They are not letting Jesus be Lord of anything except 60 minutes on Sunday morning. As you can see from the letter to the Colossians, such a life is totally out of joint with the teachings of God.

For example, more than 90% of American households own a Bible and the average household owns three. But this does not mean that Americans are reading or following the bible. On an intellectual level alone, half of Christians cannot name the four gospels and a third cannot identify Genesis as the Bibles' first book. On a behavioral level, it is sadder than that. Harvard political scientist, Robert Putnam, the author of a new book, American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us, spoke at Rice University on Monday. In an interview in the Houston Chronicle on Thursday of this week, he said some very disturbing things about American Christians. America, he says, is religiously devout, religiously diverse, and religiously tolerant. Putnam was asked this question, "Were you surprised at the tolerance of religious America?" Here what he said: [read his answer]

Tolerance, rightly defined and understood, are good values. Jesus and the apostles never converted people at the point of a sword. The gospel spread by conversion, not by coercion. People have the right to say, "No,"

to God. God gave Adam the right to eat the forbidden fruit. Of course, when we do so, we ultimately pay the eternal consequences, unless we repent and return to God. The problem is though that some Christians are not committed in their loyalty to Jesus Christ. They are going with the flow, with what works, with what is pleasing, convenient, and comfortable. Putnam says later in the interview that people do not choose churches on the basis of theology. He says that what a church teaches is not the most important thing in choosing a religion. You know what he says is the most important thing?. He says it is the people in the church, the connections that people have with their friends or the fellowship they find. Fellowship is important. The church body needs to be connected. I spoke on this last week when I pointed out the 59 “one anothers” in the NT. But if a church has all the people connections, all the fellowship, all the fun, conveniences, and comfort but does not have God, then it will ultimately perish. Nothing can succeed without God. Jesus said, “Without me you can do nothing.” Let me read you now the most disturbing thing that Putnam said is happening with America Christians. Speaking of politics and religion, he said, [quote]

I am surprised, too, by what is happening here. God is to have supreme and absolute love and loyalty in our lives.

Now let’s talk about living for Christ in our pagan culture in Houston today, especially in reference to the celebration of Halloween. Today is Oct. 31, Halloween, so this message is current and relevant. Please read the article about it in today’s bulletin. You can go to the internet and do a search of “sermons on Halloween” and you will find all the history of Halloween you care to read. You’ll find some strong sentiments against Christians celebrating Halloween and some favoring the fun and games of it. I have some of them here that I printed this week.

Based on what I have said today, and the discussion in I Cor. Chapter 10 in this article on a Christian’s relationship to culture, let me say this.

1. We must always honor and obey Jesus, no matter what. Our culture, our friends, our jobs, our politics, our environment does not determine our convictions. Jesus is Lord, everywhere, all the time, of everyone. In the O.T. God commanded his people not to engage in pagan practices that denied his rightful place as the source, force and course of their lives. For example hear the word in Deut. 18:9-13:

⁹ When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. ¹⁰ Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in ^a the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, ¹¹ or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. ¹² Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. ¹³ You must be blameless before the LORD your God.

This is the most complete list of magical arts or spiritistic arts in the OT. These were all practiced in Canaan and are condemned and prohibited. The people are not to resort to such sources for their information, guidance or revelation. Rather, they are to listen to the Lord's true prophets-vs. 14-22. this passage speaks of a coming prophet to which all the people must listen. The NT says that Jesus is that prophet (Acts 3:22).

2. The origin or etymology of a thing does not determine whether it is right or wrong hundreds and thousands of years later. The origin of dominoes, dice, and cards as gambling tools does not mean that anyone who plays with them today is gambling or supporting that business. The origin of the word "malaria" is "bad air" which is what people thought caused it a hundred years ago, but today we know it is the mosquito. However, we still call it by the original named meaning "bad air." The origin of Christmas trees, Dec. 25th as the birthday of Jesus, the word "Christmas" meaning "Christ-mass" does not mean that a person today who celebrates Christmas is giving credence to pagan ideas, worshiping a tree, or celebrating a Catholic mass. The same with the celebration of birthdays, a non-biblical subject, which originated in paganism. The same goes for some things associated with Halloween. The origin over 2500 years ago of bobbing for apples, dressing in costumes, and carving Jack-o- Lanterns is pagan but they have a totally different meaning now. Probably more than 90% of the people do not know anything about the origin of those practices but enjoy them today as harmless fun having nothing to do with Celtic paganism. God wants us to enjoy life, food, fun, games, people, holidays, and the calendar. So if you want to dress up tonight as Buzz Lightyear, a doctor, policeman, a Star Wars creature, an historical person, or Spider Man, do so. Enjoy the fun. If you want to go around trick or treating, it is not wrong to eat candy, to collect candy, and to let people give you candy. The origin of the idea behind trick or treating is pagan but the practice today has nothing of that meaning. God gives us freedom in Christ to enjoy our culture as long

as that culture is not practicing things contrary to Jesus. It's the same principle as that of eating meats or not eating meats in I Corinthians chapters 8 and 10 and in Rom. 14. Do not judge one another in these practices. If you want to do it, do it with delight and a good conscience. If you want to abstain, that's OK, too, but don't judge another in these non-moral matters.

3. Don't give any credence, or support, to any belief or practice that denies Jesus or the biblical teachings. Jesus is all we need for information, guidance, and support. That's why we cannot engage in practices that encourage or support things like fortune telling, contacting the dead, ghosts, haunted houses, and witches. Those are things that dabble in the spiritual world and demonic activity can be behind those things. Ghosts do not exist. There are no such things as haunted houses. Death is not something to fantasize or get overwhelmed with since Jesus rose from the dead and gives life and hope to all in him. Jesus will let none of those invisible evils hurt us. We are guarded and protected in Christ. Jesus gives us safety and security. Do not let the negatives of the dark side of evil powers enter your mind or control you. Don't play with the devil's fire and his practices because it could be a way for invisible, evil spiritual forces to enter your heart and mind.

4. I think we should be positive about any cultural practice that we can use to glorify God. A front page article in yesterday's Houston Chronicle highlighted some churches that are using this occasion to have a fall festival or fun alternative night. Churches know that they cannot ignore the holiday and it will go away. This is a good night to connect with the community. It's one occasion when our neighbors come to us. We can turn on our porch lights, give the little children candy, and make ourselves available to our neighbors as they come door-to-door.

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