

As you have Received Christ, Walk in Him

Text:

Colossians 2:6-7

“Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

Introduction:

In the paragraph beginning with verse 6 we come to the heart of the letter. In the last text Paul hinted for the first time of problems when he warned the Colossians of being led astray by “enticing words”, or “plausible arguments”. Now he is going to attack what has come to be called the “Colossian heresy” head on. But before he does he writes this pivotal sentence which is the central thesis of the entire letter. In this sentence he:

- Summarizes much of what has been previously said
- Establishes the positive instruction that will be the basis for his attack of the heretical teaching
- Lays down an “indicative-imperative” that is essential to a full and flourishing Christian life

All that Paul has said up to this point was said to prepare what he is about to say. For Paul there is only one true faith in Christ, one true mystery revealed by the Father, one true gospel that brings hope and salvation. This true faith in Christ has been the subject of all that he has written thus far. Whether he is praying, singing, explaining, or admonishing, he is laying down for us the one gospel that is really good news, the one faith “once for all delivered to the saints”, and he is exhorting us to be grounded in that faith, to walk in Christ as he has been taught to us. We may see how almost everything he has said up to this point is alluded to in this one sentence by observing the following comparisons.

How Col. 2:6-6 summarizes what precedes	Previous text
“Christ Jesus the Lord” v. 6	1:15-20, The Christological Hymn; 1:27, The “mystery”, “Christ in you the hope of Glory”
Grounded in Christ and in the faith, v. 7	1:23, “If indeed ye continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the Gospel”
“As you were taught” v. 7	1: 6-7, “just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant” 1:9, “That you may be filled with all the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding”
“walking” (v. 6), and “abounding in thanksgiving”, (v. 7)	Paul’s intercessory prayer, v. 10, “to walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” “Giving thanks to the Father”, v. 12.

It is upon this positive foundation that Paul wants us to build, so that we will not be misled by false teachers. The present text lays down his basic thesis: “As you have received Christ so walk in him”. Once we have understood what Paul means by “received Christ”, and “walk in Christ” we will be well on our way towards grasping the message of this epistle. All of Paul’s desire for the Colossian believers, and for us, can be summed up in those two ideas: receive Christ, walk in him. Before we jump too quickly to final conclusions about what he means by these two things, let us examine them more closely.

I. “As you have received Christ”

Among evangelical Christians one could hardly find a better known, or more frequently employed expression than to “receive Christ”. It is the most customary way to invite people to enter into the Christian life, to be saved. We emphasize it, because we emphasize that salvation is a free gift, and a gift cannot be earned it can only be received. This is, of course, true, and it is a good and necessary emphasis. However, what we understand by receiving Christ is not exactly parallel to what Paul means here. He means what we mean, but he means much more.

For us “receiving Christ” is equivalent to believing in Christ, trusting him to save us. That is the door to salvation – “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31). John uses the term more in this sense when he says: “He came unto his own and his own

received him not, but to as many as received him to them gave he power to become the sons of God” (John 1:11).

There is a word in verse 8 that gives us the first hint as to what Paul is speaking of that a reader of the English Bible would never associate with receiving. In verse 8 Paul continues: “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and vain deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.” The word “tradition” is directly related to the word received. The word for received is often paired with another word which is best translated “delivered”. Paul uses the two together for example in I Cor. 15: 1-5 when he says:

“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.”

In this passage, where Paul defines the gospel, he tells the Corinthians that he “delivered” the gospel to them and they “received” it. The Greek word for “delivered” is *paradidomi*, and the word for received, which is the same word he uses in Col. 2:6, is *paralambano*. These words go together. They indicate a transaction where something of importance is carefully transmitted to someone else. They were used together, for example, when a property deed was transferred from a seller to a buyer. The seller “delivered” the deed, and the buyer “received” it. Now the word “tradition” comes from the same root as *paradidomi*, “received”, and it refers to that which is received. In the present text Paul is contrasting the tradition they had received about Christ, which is all that Epaphras had taught them when he had come and preached the Gospel and taught them all that they needed to know about Christ and his teaching, and the Christian way of life with “human tradition”. All teaching that might be given to them that was not “according to Christ”, which had its origin in something other than the divine revelation given in Jesus Christ was “human tradition” and not to be received. But we must emphasize that what they had received when they received Christ was the entire Christ tradition, which included not only receiving Christ as savior, but receiving his teachings and embracing his way of life. This is the reason they must “walk in him” as they have received him, that is they must live according to all of the teachings of Christ.

This was the intention of Christ when he commissioned his disciples to “make disciples of all nations”. They were to do this by announcing the good news and initiating those who had accepted it into him and into his church through baptism, and then to teach them “everything that he had commanded them”. The two things together, the good news of salvation through his death and resurrection, and the new way of life indicated in his teachings make up the Christ tradition that we receive when we become his followers. This is what is in Paul’s mind when he prefaces all that he says here with “as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord”.

To make this point clear let me illustrate it with a couple of other passages from other Pauline epistles. First more positively in I Thessalonians 4:1-8 Paul writes:

“Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.”

Notice how Paul uses the word “received” and “walk” in this passage as he does in the text were are studying. Notice also that he says what they had received were “instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus”. Paul was only the messenger, the teacher. The message and the teaching were those of Christ. It was the “tradition” of Jesus they had received. Thus he concludes the paragraph by telling them to reject the tradition was not to disregard something human, but to disregard God.

The second example comes from II Thessalonians 3:6-12:

“Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”

In this passage Paul is warning the Thessalonian believers about idleness. He says that not working and being a busybody is “not in accord with the tradition that you received”. Notice that when he commands them to get busy and “do their work quietly” and “earn their own living” he does not do it on his own authority, even as an apostle, even though he had given himself as an example of what they should be doing, but “in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

So the answer to the question: “What does Paul mean by receiving Christ?” is to receive as divinely revealed truth all of the tradition about Christ and his work, and all of his teaching. To receive the teaching about and of Christ in this way is to receive it as divine truth to be acted upon with absolute faithfulness.

II. “So Walk in Him”

To “walk” is Paul’s favorite way of referring to conduct. What he is saying is: “live your life in Christ, and conduct yourselves according to all that Christ is and taught.” To receive Christ is to submit to the authority of Christ. Much of the remainder of the letter will be about what it means to walk in Christ, but for now we may observe a series of things which assure that we will continue walking in Christ. He follows the primary command to walk in Christ with a series of four participles:

- “having been rooted”
- “being built up in him”
- “being established in the faith, in the way that it was first taught to you”
- “abounding in thanksgiving”

The first observation about this series of actions is its resemblance to what we have already noted in the apostle’s prayer where it prays:

“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (1:9-11).

Again we remark how Paul preaches and teaches as he prays. The goal of his prayer is that “they might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord”. This will result in their “bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God”. To bear fruit they must be rooted in Christ, to increase in the knowledge of God they must be “being built up in Christ”, and “being established in the faith as it was first taught” to them. The result of this in both cases is abounding thanksgiving to God. The following table illustrates the parallels:

Prayer	Exhortation
“Bearing Fruit”	“Rooted in Christ” – common tree theme, Ps. 1
“Increasing in the knowledge of God”	“being built up”
“being strengthened, etc.”	“established in the faith etc.”
“Giving thanks”	“abounding in thanksgiving”

The second thing to be observed about these four actions involved in “walking in Christ” is the progression of the tenses of the verbs. The first, which is most properly translated, having been rooted in Christ is a past perfect. It speaks of a past completed action that has ongoing results and implications. It speaks of the moment of conversion or the new birth, that moment when we are grafted into Christ and he is born in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the moment when we become a shoot of the true vine, and “bearing fruit” (1:10) becomes possible. If we have not been rooted into Christ by the new birth then there is no need to even speak of the rest of the actions in the text. The life we are speaking of is a divinely implanted life. Paul says: “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but the life that I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). We cannot walk in Christ if the life of Christ is not in us any more than a corpse is able to walk physically.

The other three actions are all progressive presents, that is, they are actions that are realities in the life of the believer who is “rooted” in Christ and “walking” in Christ. They are things which begin to happen from the moment we receive the life of Christ through the new birth, and continue until we are “present with the Lord.” We could paraphrase as follows: “having been rooted in Christ by the new birth, we are being continuously build up in him as we continue to be established in the faith that we were taught from the beginning and continue to make our constant subject of study and meditation, and this causes us to be continuously filled with thanksgiving.”

Finally I would point out that the principal point of action for us in this series of actions that characterize a life lived in Christ that keeps us fruitful in the true service of God, and delivers us from all that is contrary to the true life in Christ is found in the third action and the parenthetical statement that follows it: “established in the faith, just as you were taught”. This implies two things: (1) that “the faith” in which we are continuing is the true faith, as we remarked earlier; “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 6). Most generally when the New Testament uses the word “faith” with the definite article it is referring to the content of the faith, to what we believe, not the act of believing. This is certainly the case in this instance. The content of that “faith” is the truth about Christ, and the truth of Christ. It is everything Christ was and did, and everything Christ taught us to do. This parallels what we learned in the previous paragraph where we observed that one of the things that Paul struggled for, and that comforts our hearts is obtaining “the riches of a full understanding of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ” (2:2). The point of action for us is to make “the mystery of God and of Christ”, “the faith”, “the gospel”, as it has been delivered and as we have received it, our constant subject of prayer, study and meditation. It is for this reason that Paul was always admonishing believers to “encourage one another and build one another up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11), and it is in this way that we must understand our participation in the life of the church.

Conclusion:

I conclude the meditation on this text with a simple illustration. Most of you are aware that there are two basic kinds of life insurance. There is term life which only pays a premium if you die. You have to die to collect the benefits. Then there is whole life that not only pays benefits to your beneficiaries, but also accumulates value that you may benefit from during your lifetime. Sometimes people look at their faith as term life insurance. They are only concerned with the death benefits. They don't really think about it as having benefits in the present life. Paul would totally disagree. He would tell us the new life in Christ is an unbelievable present reality that fills life with wonder and purpose making every day a time of joy and thanksgiving, and giving us the assurance that it is only a prelude to eternal "joy unspeakable and full of glory."