



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

COLOSSIANS 1

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THE MYTH OF CASUAL CHRISTIANITY

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. (Colossians 1:21-23 NRSV)

There are some things that we can enjoy best in moderation. Ice cream is better if tasted in small bites rather than gorging. Wading in a cold mountain stream is better if taken by degrees. Other things require total commitment. Several years ago, my kids wanted me to join them in skydiving. No way! I am a pilot and unless the plane is on fire, I can't imagine jumping out of a fully operational airplane. There is no moderation in skydiving. You can't hold onto the wing and jump at the same time. Scuba diving is similar. I was once the guest on a yacht in the Caribbean. As we came near "the blue hole," the captain insisted that I dive. I am not certified to scuba dive. He assured me that he was

an instructor and could prepare me for a safe dive. He quickly equipped me with a tank, regulator, mask, weight belt, and flippers. My class consisted of 3 minutes of instruction as I sat on the edge of the boat. Then he shoved me over. The sudden splash pushed water into my regulator, and my first desperate breath had water in it. I panicked and tried to stay on top of the water where I knew there was good air. The equipment was pulling me down. My fear was making me fight to stay above the surface. The instructor kept motioning me to turn downward. He said he would meet me down below. When I finally realized he was not letting me back into the boat, I decided to turn loose and go down.

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Indescribable beauty! I was mesmerized. Swimming with fish of every color, I saw the fantastic world beneath the water's surface. I experienced what could never happen while holding onto the boat.

The gospel life is like that. It can't be enjoyed in moderation. It is all or nothing. We have tried to make it less demanding and more acceptable, but that makes it something different. Sadly, the version of Christianity that most of us Americans know is the moderation version. I was taught early on, more by implication than by direct instruction, that some things are not to be talked about. They are private and must be kept out of social conversation. We should be Christians, but we should not deal openly with sex, politics, and religion. Polite society doesn't appreciate radicals in their zeal for God. So we now have a culture that reflects myths about all three. When we failed to apply the radical truth of the new creation to those areas, we forfeited them to the powers of darkness. I'm all for restraint in discussion of private matters. I'd love to have matters of politics discussed in sane ways. My point is that we included our concept of religion into a category of moderation. It's ok to have faith, but only if it is private and non-zealous.

When Solomon wrote his treatise about life "under the sun," he exposed the natural tendency to seek moderation:

In my vain life I have seen everything:

there are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing. Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? Do not be too wicked, and do not be a fool; why should you die before your time? (Ecclesiastes 7:15-17 NRSV)

Without the revelation of the radical gospel of Jesus Christ, this is the conclusion that religious people tend to adopt. We are beset by some existential questions that beg for answers. We look for a story that will satisfy the yearning. We all want to know: **Am I loved?** This question is inevitable because we are made for love. We like love stories. Until that longing is satisfied, we are ruled by the fear of rejection. We are motivated to strive to be worthy of love and continue to try to be more attractive in order to be loved. **Will I even be tolerated if I am truly known?** We like forgiveness stories. This leads to being controlled by fear of judgment. We can't believe there is someone who will continue to love and accept us if they know the deepest part of us. So we hide, pretend, pose, and only partially reveal ourselves. Shallow relationships and internal loneliness are constant companions. **Will I have enough to last?** We like rags to riches stories. This produces the fear of poverty, and we spend our lives trying to get enough to make us secure in any circumstance. We are given to

anxiety, stress, greed, and materialism. **Will evil win?** We like hero stories. The fear of failure and defeat drives us to bad theology and schemes of control. Denial of the existence of evil and the devil is common for those paralyzed by this fear. Wanting to understand why bad things happen, we are vulnerable to fanciful conspiracy myths that seem to offer some answers.

So, we can easily see how the stories that we believe about reality are narrated either by fear or love. When fear explains the events in life and tries to answer the big questions, we are left in alienation, rejection, worry, and deception. When love becomes the narrator, we find reconciliation, acceptance, trust, and freedom. How does this work?

The apostle Paul had been fully captured by the gospel. He had counted everything as loss to gain the shared life of Christ (see Philippians 3:1-11). As he explained this gospel to the Colossians, he tells how love becomes the narrator of reality and how we embrace it:

And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard,

which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. (Colossians 1:21-23 NRSV)

In this text, Paul answers three questions:

1. **Where were you?** Paul is talking to primarily Gentile believers who have never been part of God's people or His plan to redeem the world. They were outsiders: homeless, non-citizens, impure, unqualified to come into the temple or the king's palace. They were *estranged in status*. They had no covenant, no promises, no assurance of a future. They were like refugees sitting in the dirty streets looking at the wall that separated Jews and Gentiles, reading the sign: "No Gentiles beyond this point." They were *enemies in thinking*. They had the stories of history and reality interpreted to them by fear and deception. Their minds were filled with concepts and perceptions developed without any direct revelation of God's order. They had developed theories that they tried to live by, but found themselves always longing for something more. Confused about God, they had concluded that He was angry and ready to punish. They had made Him the enemy. After all, He had chosen Israel. That must mean that He had rejected them. They did not see God as their ally, but their enemy. *They were evil in their behavior*. Bad thinking produces bad behavior.

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Trying to handle their fears and unsatisfied desires, they had become hostile, greedy, violent, and totally selfish.

2. What has happened? God has acted in history in an unprecedented way. He became a man and absorbed the enmity between God and humanity. Through the death of Jesus, reconciliation has taken place. Former enemies and refugees are brought into the family house, the King's palace, and the temple. They are citizens of the King's nation, and given a role in the mission of blessing all of creation. A new creation as spectacular as the first one has begun. It was birthed in the resurrection of Jesus. It sent a shock wave throughout the cosmos. It continues through the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead and now lives in the people of God who are defined only by faith in Jesus. The Spirit is constantly and continuously shedding more light on the grandeur of grace that is poured out in God's actions. Transformation is going on. Maturity is growing. It will never end.

3. How does this affect us? We have been born into this continuous flow of life. We rejoice in being born of the Spirit, but we don't stop there. It is just the beginning. It has all been done in Christ's work, but we don't see it all yet. We embrace the fullness of redemption as we continue on in the hope of the gospel. The resurrection

of Jesus is the most fantastic event in history, but it was only the beginning of the new creation that affects everything in creation. Just like physical light is still moving through the universe creating new galaxies, the light of the gospel is moving through humanity illuminating the majesty of Jesus and His work of salvation.

This gospel cannot be reduced to a new birth or a personal experience in time. It is cosmic in its effect. We can't take it in a kind of moderation that grants entrance into heaven when we die, but doesn't alter every thought we have and action we take. It fully saves us as we fully embrace it. The future is bigger and brighter than streets of gold and cottages in the corner of glory-land. The reconciliation of all things in Christ is our confident hope. The Christmas hymn says it well: "Joy to the world. The Lord has come. Let earth receive her king... No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessing flow as far as the curse is found." We can't just take a dip. We must take the dive.



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