

# Live from the Gospel

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's pray. Let's ask God for his help. Father, I just pray that this morning you would really bring home the truth to us, the joy of being in Christ.

Father, in Christ there is now no condemnation, but there is righteousness, there is life, there is nothing less than resurrection in Christ.

And so Father, will you help us to turn to Christ and Christ alone this morning and not be tempted by any alternatives to him. Please open our ears so that we might really hear and we might really live as your people with great joy.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Well, it's a new year, so with that comes new aims and new resolutions. Now, what is yours?

Perhaps it is to lose weight or to become more productive. But of course, easier said than done. And so we all wish, don't we, for something that could supercharge our weight loss or our productivity.

[ 1 : 11 ] I was reading an article in the Harvard Business Review this week, and it said, to supercharge my productivity, I've got to make sufficient sleep a top priority, create just one to-do list, and do the most important thing first.

Well, I've been trying to go to bed earlier, at the very least. And I don't know about you, but sometimes I wish there was something that could supercharge my Christian life.

After all, I'm well aware that last year, my prayer life was nowhere near as great as I wished it to be. And, well, wouldn't it be nice if there was some life hack that could not just help me pray better, but also read my Bible better, live my life in a more spiritual way, and just be a super Christian? Wouldn't it be nice if there was just a fail-proof way we could supercharge our Christian lives? Well, 2,000 years ago, in a city called Colossae, there were quite a number of people who were promising precisely that.

They were offering Christians a way to supercharge their Christian lives. They know that most Christians have a desire, a good desire, a right desire, a proper desire, to grow in Christ.

[ 2 : 46 ] And so these teachers, they were salesmen, really, began offering a product that said, if you just follow our philosophy or our methodology, then you would surely be better Christians.

If you are frustrated with your current experience, if you're sick of stumbling and falling, then I've got something better for you.

And so they offered an interesting mixture of teaching, one that seemed to depend heavily on the Jewish law while mixing in elements of Greek religion.

And one of your buzzwords was fullness. The way perhaps some Christian gurus today might use phrases like victory in Christ or spiritual breakthrough to attract people to their teaching today.

And so they were saying something like this. Do you truly want to experience Christian life to the full? Then come, let me teach you a deeper knowledge.

[ 3 : 56 ] Let me show you the secret of true worship. Let me give you a better spirituality. And you can sense the appeal, can't you?

After all, isn't it true that after you've been Christian for a number of years, things can seem rather, well, bland? Perhaps you hope for more.

A more obvious holiness to be produced in your lives, maybe. Or just a more dramatic form of spiritual power, however you define that power.

But it can feel like you're on a treadmill where you just keep walking and walking but end up going nowhere. And so it's easy to go looking around for something, anything really, that can supercharge our Christian lives.

But today, Paul is going to warn us to beware such scams. To use the language of 2 verse 23, these products on offer have the appearance of wisdom.

[ 5 : 08 ] But in reality, they cannot produce what they promise. They can't actually transform or supercharge you. For all their guarantees of fullness, they only leave you feeling more empty than before.

They say they'll give you an upgrade, but they end up downgrading you because, as we'll soon see, what they really do is to undo the impact of the gospel in your life.

And so Paul says, if you want to live a truly full life, then don't live from these alternatives. Instead, live from the gospel.

Christ is enough, and he is all you need to live a Christian life. That's what it means to live a gospel-centered life.

That's his main point today. Don't live from anything else but the gospel. And this morning, we'll unpack that main point under two headings.

[ 6 : 21 ] Firstly, don't live from the empty alternatives. And then secondly, live instead from the fullness of the gospel. So firstly, don't live from the empty alternatives.

In 2 verse 16 to 23, Paul begins to outline three overlapping alternatives that these teachers were peddling. And he warns us, don't fall for any of them.

First of all, he says, don't live from religious activity. Verse 16. Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink or with regard to a religious festival, a new moon celebration, or a Sabbath day.

So it seemed as if this is what some of the salesmen were saying. It's great that you know the gospel, but if you really want to push ahead in the Christian life, they said, then what you need is to follow through on certain practices.

You need to follow these food and calendar based laws. Perhaps they insisted on abstinence from wine and certain kinds of food, the way that you might hear some Christians talk about giving up meat or chocolate for Lent today.

[ 7 : 50 ] More than that, he said, one must be meticulous in the observance of certain religious festivals and holy days.

After all, did not the Old Testament insist on such things? Did not Leviticus 11 and 23 contain a long list of stipulations regarding what could be eaten and how to celebrate certain religious festivals?

Did not these laws show how believers could make clear their devotion to God and differentiate them from others? But these teachers were taking it one step further.

These religious activities, they insisted, were not just about devotion, but a clear way to show who is in and who's out.

If you failed to comply, they said, you weren't truly spiritual, you were missing out on being a supercharged Christian.

[ 9 : 02 ] And let's face it, a non-supercharged Christian is really no Christian at all. And so they were passing judgment, not just in the sense of criticizing others, but in the sense of excluding others.

But Paul says, verse 16, do not let them judge you. You see, what was the root of the problem?

After all, these practices were not wrong in themselves.

In the Old Testament, they revealed God's character. God's people understand what he was about. So, for instance, the food laws help people understand that God is holy, that he is in a different category of cleanness all by himself.

But the problem, Paul says, verse 17, is that they had confused the shadow for the substance. These are a shadow of the things that were to come.

The reality, however, is found in Christ. These religious systems, designed to help people get close to God, in the Old Testament, were like shadows.

[ 10 : 31 ] And what do shadows do? Well, they give you an idea of the basic shape of the object they are shadowing. In photography, they can add richness to the tone and the shading of a scene.

Well, that's what the Mosaic law does. They pointed forward to the shape of the gospel and help us add richness to our portrait of Jesus.

Want to understand what Jesus does on the cross? Look at the Passover. Want to understand how Jesus offers rest? Look at the Jubilee. But now that Jesus is here, now that the substance is here, why do we need the shadows any longer?

After all, if you tried to talk to the shadow of your best friend instead of your best friend themselves, or tried to watch the shadow of a movie rather than the movie itself, that would be really strange and frustrating, wouldn't it?

You're missing out on the real thing. Besides, you can't get your arms around a shadow. You can't be comforted by a shadow.

[ 11 : 55 ] It takes the substance to do that. And Christ is the substance. So here is Paul's point.

What happens when you don't live from the gospel, but try to live from the alternative of religious activity and ritual instead? Well, it will be the equivalent of plugging your Christian life into a shadow of a power source rather than the real power source itself.

That's what the false teachers are trying to sell you. And the truth is, such teaching is still around today. A few years ago, thankfully it doesn't seem to be as popular today, there was something called the Hebrew Roots Movement.

This movement taught that modern Christianity had been corrupted by Greek philosophy and that we needed to go back to the Hebrew Roots of Christianity, so to speak.

They insisted that if we love Christ, we must keep the entire Mosaic law and follow all the Jewish practices, including observing all their holy days.

[ 13 : 14 ] They even insisted that to say Jesus was wrong and that we must use the Hebrew form of Jesus, Yeshua, instead. Only then were you a real Christian.

This teaching was in Kuching. But tragically, this is to completely miss the substance. And you might nod your heads and say, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, that is obviously wrong.

But before we get too proud and pat ourselves on the back, it is good to keep pondering how else might we live from religious activity today.

Most of us probably are not tempted to observe Jewish regulations about food and holy days. But what do we use as the measuring rod to say, oh, that's how I know I'm all good with Christ?

What religious yardstick do we use to say that our Christian life is going well? Maybe we are pleased because we avoid certain things.

[ 14 : 26 ] I don't consume certain forms of entertainment. I don't wear certain types of clothes. I don't engage in certain activities. So I'm good. Or it could be something that we actively partake in.

I go to BSF every week. I serve in church every week. But the danger is when we let those things be mere, empty ritualism, which take the place of a vibrant living relationship with Christ.

And ironically, they might even just increase our pride. Now, these things are attractive, aren't they? Because they are more tangible.

It's easier to measure those things. You know, for instance, how many times I've been to BSF this month. and it's easier to use that to check whether we are in or out of God's good books than to measure something like our trust in Christ or our understanding of grace.

You know, those are harder to measure. But the thing is, we could fulfill all those religious criteria, but still fail to come to Christ himself, fail to have his heart, in which case we are not living a gospel-centered life at all, no matter how many times you've been to BSF.

[ 15 : 57 ] So that is one empty alternative. But what else do we need to be on guard against? Well, Paul says, second of all, don't live from spiritual experiences.

Look at verse 18. Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Sounds interesting, doesn't it?

Just what is going on in Colossae? Well, it could be either one of two things. It could be that some in Colossae were participating in venerating angels.

Since these angels were a link of sorts to God, they deserve to be worshipped or at least appeased. And so some of the teachers were encouraging that sort of thing.

That's certainly possible, but I think it is slightly more likely that what was happening instead was not so much that people were encouraging the worship of angels, but that they were having visions instead where they saw angelic worship.

[ 17 : 17 ] So the worship of angels here is not so much the worship given to angels, but the worship the angels themselves were giving to God.

And this seems to fit slightly better with the context, especially the second half of verse 18. In other words, there were certain Christians who were having some of the most spectacular dreams and visions.

They had a direct line to heaven, so it seemed. And quite possibly, they did. We don't have to infer that these visions they were having were necessarily false.

But here's the problem. These people were making the other Christians feel inferior because they did not share in such aesthetic experiences.

One of my friends, a full-time Christian worker, was once asked to run a workshop at a Christian conference here in Malaysia. When he went, he noticed that the main speaker who was invited was not exactly someone he was confident would speak Biblical truth.

[ 18 : 37 ] So he gently inquired of the organizers what was the thought process behind inviting this particular speaker. Oh, came the reply.

He's not like the rest of you. You guys only preach Bible. This guy can go beyond the Bible. Well, that was certainly the attitude behind these teachers.

They were saying, we've obtained a deeper level that you haven't attained, you can expound the Bible. I can see angels. So come, join our special praise and worship sessions instead.

God really shows up there. But Paul says, don't fall for this. Don't let such people disqualify you. Literally, it's don't let people cheat you. Don't let them make you think that if you have the gospel, that isn't enough, that you need all this extra stuff to truly experience God.

[ 19 : 44 ] After all, verse 18 again, such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen. They are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind.

They seem so spiritual, Paul says, but ironically, they are not filled at all with the Holy Spirit. Instead, they are tin kosong.

They are like an empty packet of twisties. You know, they look like they have something inside, they are puffed up, but when you tear it open and you let all the air out, then you realize, oh, there's nothing inside.

In fact, verse 19, they have completely lost connection with the head. They have lost connection with Jesus.

So that suggests that at one time, they were firmly holding on to Jesus, but somewhere along the way, they lost the centrality of the gospel as they got obsessed with these angelic experiences.

[ 20 : 56 ] And so they lost the very means by which they were spiritually nourished. Angelic worship, impressive as it was, could do nothing for their growth in Christ.

After all, the whole body is held together by Jesus, the head. But if you pursue spiritual experiences of this sort, as the be-or and end-or, what happens?

you decapitate the body. You cut off your excess to growth. You end up losing Jesus himself, ironically, for something inferior, angels.

Do you see what happens when we try to live purely by spiritual experiences? Now, it's important to make clear what we are not saying here. We are not saying that having visions is in itself wrong. We are not saying that if you have a strong and unusual spiritual experience, one that perhaps even involves seeing angels, that is wrong. Someone I know once described to me an experience that she had while in university, where she wondered if the person she encountered might have actually been an angel.

[ 22 : 18 ] But the problem is when we so chase the experience of 2 verse 18 that we end up in a Colossians 2 verse 8 situation, where we have been taken captive by hollow and deceptive philosophy that depend on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces rather than on Christ.

And Paul says when we do that, we are like headless chickens. You know, have you ever seen people who keep chasing the next spiritual experience?

They move from church to church, pastor to pastor, conference to conference. They are forever seeking. They are never at rest.

They are like headless chickens. You know, they can run around for a while even with great enthusiasm, but they are hardly stable and they eventually fall over.

So here's a question for us to consider. Do we chase certain experiences because we need such experiences to sustain our relationship with God?

[ 23 : 31 ] We need such experiences to feel close to God? We need such experiences to feel important and useful to Him? Well, that's not being gospel-centered.

that is turning experiences into an idol. And then third of all, Paul says, don't live from external rules. Don't live from external rules. Now, rules can be attractive, can't they? If you know who Jordan Peterson is, I think that's one reason why he's so popular.

Rules establish boundaries. They give us clarity about what we can and can't do. Now, how often have I had people come up to me and say, pastor, don't just give me principles, don't just give me general biblical advice, tell me exactly what to do.

And that's what the teachers offered. They said, verse 21, don't handle this, don't taste that, don't touch that. So, hey, at least you know exactly what to do.

[ 24 : 45 ] If I know that I should spend at least eight minutes reading my Bible and another seven minutes praying, then it's easy to know when I have fulfilled my quota.

And it's even better, verse 23, if these rules can stop me indulging in sin. Right? Want to avoid getting drunk?

Okay, easy rule. Avoid alcohol at all costs. Want to improve my self-control? Okay, easy rule, fast from sunrise to sunset. You see, with a list of rules, it's easy to feel a greater sense of security. But in the end, Paul says, they are actually a form of imprisonment. After all, the whole point of the gospel, he says, verse 20, is that you have died to such things.

You're free. You have died to what the NIV 2011 calls the elemental spiritual forces in the world. Now, that is quite a hard phrase to translate and to figure out.

[ 25 : 55 ] So, it could refer to the elements of the spiritual world, that one exercised control over them. or, as you can see on the screen, it could refer more impersonally to the basic teachings of the world, which is how the older NIV translates it, by calling it the basic principles of this world, such as legalism and self-improvement and so on.

And contextually, I think the older NIV is actually slightly more likely. But, whichever it is, the point is, those things shouldn't control you any longer.

And so, Paul says, look, Colossians, you used to be imprisoned by the fact that you thought the only way to keep your New Year's resolutions, the only way you could fight all the flaws within yourself, was by harsh self-discipline.

That's what the world or the devil wants you to believe. But, you know, that's not the gospel way. The gospel says it is Christ alone who can get rid of the mess within you.

So, why do you still live as if you can fix yourself as long as you have the right rules? After all, verse 22, such rules are merely of human origin.

[ 27 : 25 ] religion. They don't last. They are self-made religion. They end up putting the focus squarely on ourselves, rather than on Christ. And because they do that, verse 23, they just don't work.

That's what verse 23 means. You can't fix yourself, remember? You can try beating up your body all you want. You can try chopping off your hand so that you can't steal.

You can try blinding your eye so that you can't last. But would that stop you from desiring things that don't rightly belong to you? Would that stop your mind from wandering into all kinds of fantasies? Again, it is not that rules can't be helpful. But the problem is when we depend on them to supercharge our Christian lives.

For in the end, these rules might be able to modify some of your behaviour, but they are totally useless in bringing about hard change.

[ 28 : 34 ] That's why trying to build a society based on Christian values or principles without Christ is doomed to failure. It's why our deacon Christina said earlier that we don't just try to teach moral values in our Sunday school, but we teach Christ.

So here is the question. Is that how you try to live the Christian life? Do you try to use rules, especially rules about what you can't do, as the main way you try to grow spiritually?

If you do, Paul says, you are doomed to failure. that's what happens when the gospel is not at the center of our Christian life.

That's what happens when we try to live from empty alternatives, and so Paul says, don't even go there. All it does is lead to frustration, and legalism, and division, and arrogance.

So what should we do instead? Well, a Bedouin shepherd was once asked, how do you manage to keep your sheep in line, especially given that you're in the wilderness, in the countryside, where there are no fences?

[ 30 : 00 ] So how do you keep the sheep together? His answer, I don't need fences, I dig wells. If I show my sheep where water is to be found, where they can quench their thirst, well, that's enough.

They'll be drawn to that. And that is basically Paul's answer. He says, what we need is not so much fences, but wells.

What we need to know is what that well offers, and where that well is. And so that brings us to our second heading for today, live instead from the fullness of the gospel.

Live instead from the fullness of the gospel. But what does that mean? Now perhaps you're thinking, ah, okay, pastor, I think I know where you're going.

You're going to tell me now that Jesus died on the cross, and then Jesus rose again, and flowing from that, we should live thankful lives, right? Good guess?

[ 31 : 04 ] But take a closer look with me at chapter 3, verse 1 to 4, and I want you to see what Paul actually says. And I want you to observe, first of all, when he talks about death here, whose death is he talking about?

Have you spotted it? Yep, it's right there in verse 3. Who died? Well, he says not that Christ died, but you died.

Hmm, interesting. Okay, let's see where he's going. And then let's think about resurrection here. Does he mention resurrection at all in this paragraph? Answer, yes.

But whose resurrection is he talking about? Is it Christ? Well, not exactly. Instead, he talks about how you have been raised with Christ.

So what is actually going on here? You see, when we talk about the gospel, we normally think in terms of Jesus as our substitute. That is, Jesus died on the cross in our place.

[ 32 : 16 ] He died for me. And that is gloriously true. You know, that's proclaimed all around the New Testament. But that is not the only way the Bible conceives of our relationship with Christ.

It is not just that he died for you and now you live a certain way. No, more than that, the Bible says that you are now in him.

In fact, that's probably the most basic way the New Testament describes a Christian. You are in Christ. And where Christ goes, you go.

That's the point. Christ died, so you died. Christ was raised, so you were raised. Where Christ goes, you go. Because in Christ, you are with Christ, which is the language that Colossians 3, 1-4 uses, wherever he is.

Think of it this way. imagine yourself at the airport about to board a plane. The plane is on its way to Singapore, and Singapore is where you want to be.

[ 33 : 33 ] Now, what relationship do you need with the plane at this point? Would it help to be under the plane, to submit yourself to the plane?

Or would it help to be motivated by the plane, to watch it fly off and whisper, oh, one day I hope to do that too? What about following the plane?

You know the plane is going to Singapore, and so why not see which direction it goes, and then follow behind the plane? That way you will end up there too. Is that the kind of relationship we need with the plane?

Of course not. The relationship you need with the plane is not to be under it, or behind it, or motivated by it, you need to be in it.

Why? Because by being in the plane, what happens to the plane will also happen to you. The question, did you get to Singapore, will be part of a larger question.

[ 34 : 38 ] Did the plane get to Singapore? If the answer to the second question is yes, and if you're in the plane, then what happened to the plane will also have happened to you.

And in the same way, what happened to Christ happened to us. Are you trusting in Jesus? Then, 3 verse 1, you have been raised with Christ.

This is a statement of fact. This is something that has already happened. happened. You were included in his death and you are now in possession of his resurrection life.

Whatever righteousness, whatever life that is in Christ is now all yours as well. How you currently feel about yourself does not affect that fact one bit.

You are objectively speaking as close to Christ as you could possibly be. You're in him. right now, you might be seated in this hall, but spiritually speaking, you are seated where Christ is, at the right hand of God.

[ 35 : 54 ] Now, that's your identity. That's your privilege. Colossians 3 verse 1 and 3 are not commands, die with Christ, rise with Christ.

No, they are descriptions of what you already are. Your old life has died, you are raised to new life. Now, do you see how different this is to the false teachers?

The false teachers were saying, if you do this or that, if you follow this rule, if you have that experience, then you will experience the fullness of the Christian life.

But Paul says, if you are a Christian, you already have all the fullness you ever need. You are nothing less than a resurrected new creation.

Now, this is what the Christian life is all about. It is not lived out of emptiness seeking fullness. Rather, it is lived out of the fullness you already have in Christ.

[ 37 : 06 ] It is lived out of the identity you have already received in Christ. And so the gospel, it's not like a ticket to a concert.

You know, when you go to a concert, you give the ticket to the ticket person and then you're in and then, who cares about the ticket anymore, right? You can show it away. It's worthless because you're in already. No.

The gospel is more like an engine to a race car. You know, if you take out the engine at any time, your race car is useless.

It cannot race. Same with the gospel. No gospel, no way to run the race. But with the gospel, you can run the race, but you need it all throughout.

For through the gospel, you are now united to Christ. You are in him. And that new life, verse 3, is totally hidden with Christ. It's kept completely secure.

[ 38 : 08 ] It's safe from any threat, any danger, anything that might cause harm to it. So much so that when Christ finally appears, our glorious selves are guaranteed to appear with him.

Now that is the fullness already contained in the gospel. people. And when we grasp we are in Christ, we will seek him.

That's what it means, verse 2, to set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. It doesn't mean that we become monks or cannot enjoy the good things of this earth, but that our mindset is different because we're in Christ.

Now imagine that you're planning to immigrate to Japan. You naturally begin to set your minds on all things Japanese. You would naturally want to become more fluent in the language.

You start learning to cook with Japanese ingredients. You think and learn about Japanese culture. In the same way, because we have become citizens of Christ's country, we begin to set our minds on all things Christ.

[ 39 : 22 ] We want to become fluent in the language of the gospel. We want to know what it really means to know his sufferings by being willing to count the cost, by being willing to suffer for him ourselves.

Not because our sufferings atone for us, but because we are Christians. We follow the culture of Christ. And the culture of Christ involves suffering.

And that's why verse 5, we will put to death what belongs to our old identity. And we can deal with our remaining sinful selves because we are secure in who we are.

Now, outside of Christ, we used to be insecure. And so, verse 6, the coming wrath of God was terrifying for us. But in Christ, we can die to our old selves.

And that would include a makeover in every area of our lives. It includes the private areas of our lives. Verse 5, impurity, lust, evil desires, the things that are inside us, the things that other people can't see.

[ 40 : 39 ] Anger, rage, malice, slander. It includes the relational areas of our lives. Verse 9, how we interact with one another.

For we know who we are. When we are tempted to say something wrong, or to treat someone wrong, we can now say, this is not who I am.

This is not my life any longer. And this is not simply the power of positive thinking, as if we are trying to imagine something into reality. No, this rather is us aligning with gospel reality.

reality. So let me try to give a concrete example. Suppose you feel the temptation to boast proudly in a piece of work that you have done. But because you are in Christ, you say, that is not who I am anymore.

I am not the kind of person who does that. And so you keep quiet. And as you do so, you do feel some pain. After all, previously, getting recognized was what you wanted.

[ 41 : 49 ] And now that you don't get it, you feel a loss. That's how you used to feel good about yourself, by boasting. But now you can't justify yourself in that way.

There is pain. At that moment, you are putting to death your old self. But as you remember who you are in Christ, you remember you are loved and accepted not on the basis of what you do, but on the basis of what Christ did for you.

And so you are being raised with Christ. You recognize in a small way that you are being formed to be more like Christ in that moment.

You begin to see this is your glory. You begin to see that these are the new clothes that God has given you. And you begin to derive joy that you are now reflecting Jesus just a little bit more than you had previously done.

But that's what it means to live from the gospel. That is one significant aspect of what it means to be gospel centered. It's to let the truth of the gospel, the truth that you are now united with Christ, drive how you live.

[ 43 : 06 ] It is to let the gospel become both the map and the engine by which you travel. So my brothers and sisters, don't live from the empty alternatives.

Live from the fullness of the gospel. Live knowing that you are united to a person who is full of righteousness, full of life, and in whom your entire life is now rooted and grounded in, who gives you the strength to persevere in godliness.

Let's pray to live such a gospel-centered life. Well, Heavenly Father, we come before you now. Maybe I'll just give us a few seconds in silence so that we can individually come to you. Well, Father, I pray for all of us today.

I pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ. I pray once again that you would have really hit home that amazing truth that we are in Christ, that there is no condemnation in him, that because of Christ, we have died with him and we are raised to new life with him.

[ 44 : 31 ] So, Lord, we pray that we will pray as the new selves that you have given us. You have done so much for us. You have given us the fullness of the gospel. It is all we need. It is everything we need to live a godly life.

And so we pray that we will depend on Christ, we will trust in him, we will be driven by him, and that we will want to do all we can to put to death our old selves, not just individually, but as a church, so that we might live a gospel centered life, a life that is in lockstep with what you want for us. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen.