



Lesson 6

Heart Circumcision *Colossians 2:6-3:4*

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.

Summary

Being placed into Christ, our inner man, our heart, has been circumcised from the flesh by the Holy Spirit's application of the death and resurrection so that our spiritual inner life is from Christ in heaven on whom we set the gaze of our hearts by faith.

Deadly Errors in Transformation

The following table observes what Paul is engaged with as error faced by the church.

Several basic errors have always been embraced by God's people, both under the Old and New Covenants with disastrous affects for growth and change, for transformation, for practical heart and behavior holiness. The following table extracts the data from the text. We will explain more as we follow the argument of the text in the rest of the lesson.

Answering the Errors

Verses	Myth	Truth
8-10	Gnosticism Christ is less than God and not truly human because the flesh, the body is inherently evil so we must transcend the body to be holy.	Christ, as fully human, is God in the flesh in a human body uncorrupted by sin in Himself or His body.
11-17	Legalism One must live by the rules and regulations of the Old Covenant to be holy under the New Covenant.	The work of the cross grants forgiveness, pays the debt and cuts us free from sin and the Old Covenant leaving us liberty in righteousness
18-19	Mysticism One can only be holy by direct access to God through personal revelations by angelic visitations or visions.	Holiness is a result of being in Christ, the head of the body and holding fast to Christ and our identity in Him.
20-23	Asceticism One can be only holy by denying and abusing the body because it is inherently evil.	We live outwardly holy because we have been crucified with Christ so that we live in the body but are not its slaves, but its masters.

Note that this is structured on a chiasm. Gnosticism and Asceticism are rooted in paganism and a false view of the body. Legalism and mysticism are rooted in religion and a false view of the Bible.

Analyzing the Errors

Notice that every myth makes the following theological error.

The body/world/flesh is inherently e v i l.

The body is the s o u r c e of my sin and ungodliness.

What Christ has done for us may be s u f f i c i e n t for our redemption, but not for our transformation.

Religious self-help, self-affirmation, self-fulfillment

The errors are focused on the e x t e r n a l.

The errors deny the centrality of C h r i s t for our personal and practical holiness.

Ask the class to briefly identify the modern versions of these errors: Religious psychologies, self-help, self-affirmation theories, legalism, etc.

The I m p o r t a n c e of Christ's Centrality (v.1-7)

Paul highlights the centrality of Christ for the Christian life and walk.

In His C o n c e r n (v.1-3)

The focus of his struggle for them is that:

To grow together in their k n o w l e d g e of Christ (v.1-2)

In the face of great opposition we need to be encouraged and enabled to grow in knowing Christ in a transforming way.

To affirm together the c e n t r a l i t y of Christ (v.3).

With so many errors flooding into the church that want to substitute or suppress or supersede Christ, we must affirm His centrality as the sum and source of all that God gives to His people.

In His P u r p o s e (v.4-5)

The aim of affirming the centrality of Christ is to enable them:

To r e s i s t false teaching and intellectual persuasion (v.4)

The false wisdoms of the world will often sound and feel persuasive and plausible. We must recognize their deluding and deceiving effect.



To c o m m e n d them for holding the line (v.5)

The word here is for soldiers holding formation in the march and in the battle.

In His C o m m a n d

(v.6-7)

If Christ is central, then here is what is entailed.

Its s t a n d a r d of grace through faith

We have received Christ, we have begun as Christians by grace through faith, so we must continue by faith. Having begun by faith we do not turn back to pagan or religious methods of holiness.

Its s p h e r e in all of life

The command is to walk, to live, to be transformed, to grow in Christ. We are to grow to be pleasing to God in every sphere of life. No facet of transformation is achieved by any other means.

Its s c o p e in Person and doctrine

We must then be grounded and built up in Him and in doctrine (the faith), Knowing and growing in Christ is both subjective and objective. Being pleasing to God requires that we know God in personally and propositionally.

Its s o u r c e in the apostolic teaching

The teaching that will ground in Christ and in truth is the Scripture. They, the Colossians had been taught by the apostles. We are also taught by the apostles and prophets through the Word of God. Being centered in Christ means we will be centered on the Scriptures.

Its s t i m u l a t i o n in grace based gratitude

All this is to be stimulated by an abundant gratitude *that this is the way it is*. The gratitude here is thanksgiving for having been delivered from the world's system and now being focused on Christ. Gratitude is called for over against complaining that this is too hard, to esoteric, to Bible focused.

The wisdom of God in Christ stands as the Christians treasure, teaching and transforming wisdom. We turn away to the seductive and persuasive systems of human wisdom to our ruin. We will be despoiled of that which is our only hope and help, that we believe, trust, embrace and walk in Christ.



The Instruction in Christ's Centrality (v.8-15)

This paragraph is the foundational instruction that relates Christ's work on the cross to our heart and behavior transformation.

Our Responsibilities in Christ (v.8)

This opening command highlights the importance of the instructions that follow.

To not be enslaved by false wisdom

Error divides, destroys and enslaves. Its false wisdoms can become so entangled in our thinking that it will be difficult to renew our minds.

To recognize the source of error

The false ways to live the Christian life have as their source basic human traditions or teachings and the elementary spirits of the age, probably referring to either the Old Covenant or to the Ancient Demonic myths.

To affirm the standard for truth

Every method for Christian living must be measured against the standard of Christ's person and work, as we have already seen. It is not a pragmatic, cultural or psychological test – it is the test of propositional truth about who Jesus is and what He has done.

Our Fullness in Christ (v.9-10)

There is reciprocal fullness which displays the sufficiency of Christ.

All of God is in Christ bodily

In the incarnation we see the example and the enablement to live a fully, God-pleasing life in this world.

All believers are indwelt by God in Christ

In the indwelling by the Spirit, we receive all that fullness. This does not make us deity; but it does enable us to live holy. This idea is all through Paul and Peter's writings.

Our Circumcision in Christ (v.11-12)

So much misunderstanding arises from this verse. The teacher will need to make the following exegetical and theological points to clear the way for the central truth taught here for our subject.

Old Covenant circumcision is the type of New Covenant circumcision, not baptism.

The circumcision of males in their flesh is the type of the circumcision of all believers in the spirit.



The command to circumcise in the Old Covenant has been fulfilled by Christ at the cross and applied to us by the Spirit at conversion.

The command to circumcise infants in the Old Covenant is never repeated in the New Covenant either as a command or by an example.

Baptism in most texts simply means, "To place into." We know from the context whether water or Spirit baptism is being referred to.

Water baptism represents the whole work of the cross and resurrection with an emphasis on our dying and being raised with Him.

Its Spiritual E f f e c t (v.11)

Before our conversion, our outer man and our inner man were intertwined so that we were sinful in our persons and in our deeds.

(Teacher: Illustrate this by clasping your hands together, showing that the inner and outer can be distinguished like the left and right hands, but is locked together)

When we were saved, the Holy Spirit "circumcised" us; that is, He cut our inner man, our heart away from the flesh/world/old man/the outer man.

(Teacher: Illustrate this now by placing your open hands, palms together. The two are distinguishable, both still exist, but are no longer intertwined.)

Its Spiritual C a u s e (v.12)

This circumcision is caused by our union with Christ by the Holy Spirit into the death and resurrection of Christ.

This has its effect in holiness by faith. When we believe this to be true, then the power of sin is nullified and the resurrection power of God by the Spirit produces the holiness of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit so that we walk by faith. The inward work accomplished at the cross, applied to us at conversion, now is Christ-centered foundation for our Christian living.

Our R e s u r r e c t i o n in Christ (v.13-15)

Our union with Christ in His resurrection means that we have not only died to the world/flesh/old but now are made alive by being united to Christ.

Granted us new life raising us out of spiritual deadness.

Our new life in Christ and the resurrection power that brought it about is the power available by faith to live godly lives. We need no longer be subject to the power of sin in the world or the flesh because of the work of Christ applied by the Spirit.

Forgiven of our trespasses freeing us from guilt.

We need no longer be burdened and weakened in our consciences by guilt over our sins which have been forgiven at conversion and through confession as believers.

Canceled the debt incurred by the legal demands of the Law.

We are no longer under the demands or debt of the Law since the debt required was paid and the demands fulfilled in Christ. We do not go back to the Law to live as Christians.

Disarmed spiritual enemies empowering victory over them.

We need no longer be defeated by Satan, demons or any other spiritual being or power seeing that they have been defeated and shamed by Christ's death and resurrection.

**The I m p e r a t i v e s from Christ's Centrality
(v.16-3:3)**

Three powerful implications and imperatives arise from these great truths.

***Do not try to live by the O l d C o v e n a n t.* (V.16-19)**

While there is some discussion as to whether this whole paragraph is about the Old Covenant, it seems to be the most consistent with both what is commanded. Two imperatives are aimed at keeping Gentiles from being pushed into living by the Old Covenant by Jews in their day and by Covenant theologians in our day.

Do not allow others to j u d g e you (v.16-17)

Do not try to live by the shadows when Christ is the substance. Note that both the Levitical and National case law were being pressed on the Gentiles. We must not try to live by the Old Covenant nor must we allow others to try to force us into it. *To do so is to not walk by faith in Christ, period.*

Do not allow others to d i s q u a l i f y you (v.18-19)

If we try to live by extra-Biblical revelations we will be disqualified in our walk with Christ. Paul clearly attacks the motivations of people who teach and train in this area – they are prideful and puffed up.

We must hold fast to Christ from whom all of us receive our nourishment and strength (v.19).

***Do not try to live by h u m a n r e g u l a t i o n s.* (v.20-23)**

Paul challenges the believers as to why they are trying to live the Christian life by rules and regulations. Instead of stated directly as an imperative, the challenge is given as an interrogative, a question.

Rules living is from the world to which you have d i e d.

Living by law is the God's way of dealing with sinners in the world. But we have died to that realm and no longer live by rules and regulations, by a law



system. Notice that Paul generalizes from the Mosaic Law to rules and standards added to or substituted for law. As he will do in Romans 7, Paul asks, “Why would you go backwards?”

Rules living is u s e l e s s against the indulgences of the flesh.

The final indictment is that, like the Law, rules and regulations cannot keep us from sin. They only define sin or inform our consciences. These may be attractive as a show of wisdom, but they are useless to deal with the flesh.

We must understand that going back to the Old Covenant or trying to live by rules and standards will not keep us from sinning.

***Do live by faith in the truths of the g o s p e l.* (3:1-4)**

We must hold fast to our identity in Christ, the provisions of the cross, and live by faith and thus receive the grace to walk with Christ. Two imperatives work out how to walk with Christ by faith. Both of these are acts of believing what the Bible says, even when we cannot sense or experience these realities in our bodies.

S e e k things above where Christ is (v.1)

Living as a Christian means that we must pursue God’s heavenly agenda.

S e t your minds on things above (v.2-3)

Living as a Christian means that we focus our thoughts on Christ.

Patiently p e r s e v e r e until Christ comes (v.4)

Living as a Christian means that our hope is focused on the future realities which define us presently.

Lessons for Living

Recognize the common s u b s t i t u t e s for Biblical Christian living.

Many of these are so common in religious circles and are so accepted that recognizing and countering them is very difficult. Many of us grew up in very legalistic backgrounds. Many of us are exposed to the call to return to the Old Covenant and Mosaic Law preferred by Reformed Covenant Theology. Charismaticsism has popularized mystical means to holiness and the dependence upon on-going revelation in dreams, visions and prophecies.

Affirm that these common substitutes are N O T viable alternatives and are dangerous to our souls.

Many Christians argue that these may not be required for Christian living but are allowed by the Scriptures. This is not so. Paul clearly condemns these as well as marking them out as being ineffective.

Seek to live the Christian life by f a i t h, believing all that the Scriptures tells us is true of Christ and of us in our union to Him.

This is so hard for us – we want the practical guidance of how-to's. The tendency of the Bible is to focus on what we believe and desire with how our behavior and emotions arise from them.

Your inner man, your heart, has been cut free from the flesh, the world, through your union with Christ and your being placed into His death and resurrection.

This great truth, so rarely taught today, is the foundational truth behind so much of Paul's thinking. This is unique to the New Covenant. This is the spiritual circumcision of the Sprit in the New Covenant to which physical circumcision in the Old Covenant pointed.

You must respond to these truths through all the imperatives Paul writes – we are actively responding to these truths.

Sometimes when these truths have been taught in history, they have been accompanied by a passive approach to Christian living – a let go and let God. This is wrong. Believing the Bible's teaching on these things ought to cause active obedience and a grace enabled, gratitude abounding, Christ-centered walk with God until Jesus comes. Then all we are in Him will be put on full display.