



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 21 Commentary Colossians
Lesson 22 Questions 1 Timothy

PAUL, APOSTLE AND BISHOP Letter to the Colossians

INTRODUCTION

Colossae was an important city famous for its production of fine cloth. A convert of Paul's named Epaphras had brought the faith to Colossae and probably two other towns nearby. Epaphras reports to Paul a problem in his Church and Paul writes a letter to the Colossians.

There is an indication here of an early development in the Church. In this letter, Paul wrote to a community that he had not seen, but apparently has a recognized authority to guide and govern it. Epaphras recognizes this and reports to Paul who writes a letter of instruction to the Colossians in which he says of Epaphras: "Who represents us as a faithful minister of Christ" (Colossians 1:7). Here, Epaphras is in the role of what we call a priest today, and Paul is in the role of Bishop, with authority over Christian communities within his territory, which he delegates to his representative. At the same time, Paul names Epaphras as "our dear fellow slave," which might mean that they were in prison together...

Dangerous doctrines introduced among the Colossians included an exaggerated belief that higher beings had control over human affairs and that it was important to know their nature and their workings. They also shared control over areas of the earth, and even human destinies. In Old Testament Wisdom literature, Paul had found proof that God's wisdom controlled the universe and that this wisdom was fully revealed in Christ. Paul saw a tendency among the Colossians to lessen Christ and who He was, His unique place and His all-powerful cosmic role in the universe.

These passages include some of the New Testament's finest writing; they are used to describe Jesus in some important liturgies, including a hymn in the Divine Office. Colossians also instructs these Christians about conquering personal sins, and about Christ's standards of practicing love of neighbor.

I. GREETING AND OPENING (Colossians 1:1-12)

The customary greeting names the writer, including Timothy and the recipients, "the holy

ones at Colossae” since Baptism had so changed their state with God. The addition here of “brother” for Timothy was a common practice among Christians who considered themselves “a covenant brotherhood in Christ.” We find this practice preserved today in religious congregations: “Brother John” or “Sister Mary.”

Paul mentions hearing of their strong faith and love for each other, of their conversion by Epaphras, and of his own prayer unceasingly for them that they will attain “full knowledge” and will please the Lord “in every way” (Colossians 1:9-10).

As Paul continues, he outlines for all future Christians, and now for us, what a “life worthy of the Lord” includes:

“You will multiply good works of every sort, and be pleasing to him in every way; you will grow in the knowledge of the Lord, you will have the strength needed to stand fast, even to endure joyfully whatever may come, and give thanks to the Father for making you worthy to share the lot of the saints in light.”

(Colossians 1:10-12).

In which of these are you growing and which need growing?

In this opening, Paul calls God “Father” three times (verses 2, 3, and 12), the last one introducing the important and impressive teaching on the role of Christ. In using “Father” Paul wants his Christians to know God as Father as Christ did.

Christ himself taught us a prayer when we call God our Father, and the Church says in the Apostles Creed: “I believe in God the Father Almighty.” In the same passage with the “Our Father” Matthew quotes Jesus: “Your heavenly Father knows all that you need” (Matthew 6:32b).

Paul’s use of “Father” for God shows his own new insight and also his instruction to the Chris-

tians that it is our privilege to know God as Jesus did. In Colossians 1:12-13 Paul shows us his understanding of the Father’s gift of Christ to us: “I give thanks to the Father for having made you worthy to share the lot of the saints in light. He rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of His Beloved Son.”

II. THE ROLE AND PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST (Colossians 1:13-23, Psalm 89:28, John 1:3-18)

A. The Fullness of Christ. Christians of that time made their baptismal statement by proclaiming in Greek that Jesus was “Kyrios” (Lord) (Romans 10:9). The addition of “Christos” meant the anointed one of God “who rescued us and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.” Jesus then is “Son, God, and King, as well as Kyrios and Christos.” Here, Paul refers to the Old Testament Wisdom literature which sees the creation and the harmony of it as the work of Personified Wisdom, now contained in the person of Christ, in whom all God’s wisdom and knowledge are hidden (Colossians 2:3).

B. A Christian Liturgical Hymn (Colossians 1:15-20). Some scholars agree that this is a Christian hymn, which might have been familiar to Paul and his people. As a hymn, its lyrics sing of Christ as Man, Son of God, King and judge of the world and of having divine redemptive power, and the fullness of the God shown in the Old Testament. Faith sees God present in Him, comprehended by human beings. Christ shared in the creation of all; creation owes all that has been, is and will be (verse 17) to Christ. In Him we have a personal knowledge of God; it is a knowledge for the early Christians, quite different from all pagan relationships with believers in their gods. We can love Christ, commit ourselves to Him as God, hope in Him. Christ is the Good News, “Gospel”: in old English, “God’s Spell” (news).

C. Reconciliation for All (Colossians 1:23b-29). As members of the Church, Paul tells

us: “You must hold fast to faith, be firmly grounded and steadfast in it, unshaken in the hope promised you by the gospel you have heard. This gospel is for all mankind; in the Greek this idea is expressed by the word “katholikos.” The Church is His body; like Christ it is for all times, all places, all truth, all people, with all authority, as Jesus said as He left earth in His Ascension. Paul sees Him as one in whom “everything in heaven and on earth was created, visible and invisible”—“Katholikos” (Colossians 1:16, Matthew 28:18-20).

Christ has in His sacrifice on the cross reconciled us to God; His offering for us totally covers the whole human race’s sins. But we need to know it; all through history people like Paul have given up all to travel over the earth to bring this truth to those who need it, but don’t know it.

“You must hold fast to faith, be firmly grounded and steadfast in it, unshaken in the hope promised you by the gospel you have heard” (Colossians 1:23). Ask yourself: “Am I firmly grounded and steadfast in faith? Am I a Christian who knows the gospel, all of it; have I read it again and again in my life”? Holy Scripture has the words of God to us; through them God can instill understanding needed in our lives, our problems, of Himself, and of ourselves. Hearing Scripture read to us in the Mass is one important way the Church uses the Word of God, and it is explained there. But the meaning for each of us as we pray for light and guidance and then prayerfully read from Scripture is given to us by the Holy Spirit as fits our need. It is amazing how many times we can read the same text and receive an understanding that we did not have before, for the one we heard earlier fitted that time. This is how God provides for us through His word. Most of the Christian times did not have access to personal Bibles. How blessed we are!

One of the holdovers after the printing press was invented was the beginning of copying new translations of the Bible, without having been

seen by the local bishop or any authority. Very soon, mistakes were discovered and the Church officials objected to this; but the correction was not made. When Luther, an Augustinian monk, protested against a number of abuses existing in the church, he was right in most of his protests, but quite wrong in an important one or two. There were those who differed with him in their criticism and doctrines began to be taught in new ways. The Renaissance age corrupted many leaders of the church; many unworthy clergy, high and low, existed. A reform was greatly needed; no one was found for that. Luther’s insistence that the Bible alone was the rule of faith and private interpretation was the right of all, produced many differing interpretations and authorities which, in some ways, weakened Christianity greatly. Meanwhile the Church did have its reform and the Catholic Counter-Reformation changed the practices of the Church so needed. The “Universal Church” was broken into factions and “faiths,” but doctrines of the early Church are unchangeable.

D. Paul’s Role (Colossians 1:24-29). We learn from Paul how we are to accept and take suffering that we endure: writing to the Colossians he says, “I find my joy in the suffering I endure for you” (Colossians 1:24). He speaks of something “lacking in the sufferings of Christ,” which God wants to add, through us, Christ’s brothers and sisters; understanding his term must not give the idea that Christ’s merits were not infinite. Paul had not even met those for whom he suffers with joy.

Can we “fill up what is lacking” by “my own flesh”? Many believe that this expression means what is lacking by the preaching of the gospel to all. See how Paul extended himself to do this, to write to and develop the churches not personally baptized by him. Such a zeal, a hope to bring truth and goodness coming from our faith in Christ, can be given us by the Holy Spirit. Ask Him.

III. WARNINGS OF FALSE TEACHERS (Colossians 2:4 - 3:4)

Paul warns against “specious arguments, seductive philosophy that follows mere human traditions.” We need to guard ourselves in our days also. If Jesus is our true Lord, “walk in Him.” The Christian hymn comes to mind: “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” A closer walk means a walk more in rhythm to Christ beside us; it means that we always and daily start out to walk closely with Christ, with His teaching, His presence, with His Church, with His sacrifice on the altar each day, His Body is there for us.

In Paul’s day, belief in false gods led to worthless bodily rules, and also to pride before others, showing our religiosity. In every age, this is a danger.

IV. IDEAL CHRISTIAN LIFE (Colossians 3:1 - 4:1)

A. All Vices Left Behind (Colossians 3:1-11). “Set your heart on higher realms”—look up, not down. Yes, our inner life may be “hidden now with Christ in God, but when he appears, then shall we too appear in glory”; and that glory will not change forever. With these thoughts, Paul begins to encourage “putting to death” in us anything in our nature that is rooted in earth. Here Paul lists sins possible to our natural bodies: “fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desires, and lust, which is idolatry; these provoke God’s wrath” (Colossians 3:5-6). He tells the Colossians: “These sins were your very life” (Colossians 3:7). Such sins today are more and more common and known of, as our newscasts and papers report the crimes, evils in all levels, all places, all ages, in modern society. Do such people ever know that there are “higher realms” where “we too appear in glory” (Colossians 3:1-4)? Do we reach out to rescue such people, to join others in the effort, even if it is only a dollar bill we send to a group dedicating themselves to runaway children or to men released from prison?

In verse 8, Paul hits closer to home, “You must put aside now—anger, quick temper, malice, insults, foul language, and lying to each other” (Colossians 3:8-9). “Be a new man” or woman, growing, being “formed anew in the image of his Creator” (Col 3:10). Here Paul leaps over all levels of differences among us, because “Christ is everything in all of you” (Colossians 3:11).

B. You are God’s Chosen Ones (Colossians 3:12-17). Strong habits of the gentle love so difficult to develop: (Such love is not a “happencance”) “kindness, heartfelt mercy, humility, meekness, and patience,” enable Christians to “bear with one another, forgive whatever grievances you have against one another,” and here Paul adds a compelling motive: “Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you” (Colossians 3:13). Paul, brought up as a faithful Jew on Old Testament riches, adds: “Sing gratefully to God from your hearts in psalms, hymns, and inspired songs” (Colossians 3:16). These counsels from verses 12-17 are repeated in all times and all ways by Christian readings and songs.

C. A Family in Christ (Colossians 3:18-21). As before, Paul begins with the submissive wife, so difficult a role or objective for women of today.

APPLICATION

This very phrase was a powerful influence on a Cuban refugee, educated and well-off and Catholic, who with her doctor husband fled Castro Cuba and found herself in sparse West Texas, where a doctor would always be welcomed to restart a life. The marriage was in trouble for some time because of this Bible teaching on wives. The highly educated and self-sufficient wife could not believe this was a way to a happy marriage. Some West Texans influenced her to daily Scripture reading and on her first try, she found this chapter from Colossians. Verses 12-17, one of Paul’s eloquent passages on Christian life, seemed a goal worth adopting. But she struggled over “be submissive

to your husband.” She related to me the result of a decision to try it for a while. To her surprise, her husband, seeing such a change from the usual response, asked her why. She opened the Bible and showed him Paul’s directions for a Christian family. As he read, his eyes saw ahead to verse 19: “Husbands, love your wives. Avoid any bitterness toward them.” At that moment, he realized that real love could not domineer over others, but dealt gently, lovingly, and fairly, which changed his ways. At the time she told me this account, she glowed with peace and joy. I’ve never forgotten it. This is what the word of God and the grace of the Holy Spirit can effect in us.

In regard to slaves and their owners, Paul’s inspired words softened and improved, we hope, life

for the unjust institution binding slaves. This passage also applies well to employees and employers. It is the application of the example of Jesus who “took the form of a slave being born in the likeness of men... Because of this, God highly exalted him...” (Philippians 2:7, 9).

Respond in love. A wise way.

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 22
1 Timothy

Day 1 Read the Notes. If there is anything there that is new to you, quote it; otherwise, find a point that you appreciated.

Day 2 Read 1 Timothy 1:1-20, Acts 16:1, Acts 26:9-11.

a. Give three aims Paul gives to Timothy for an evangelist.

b. What do you learn about law from Paul?

c. Read Acts 7:59 - 8:3, 1 Timothy 1:12-15. Give your reaction to this account.

Day 3 Read 1 Timothy 2:1-15.

a. Compare 1 Timothy 2:1-4 with a practice today where we find it done.

b. Give your reaction to verses 9 and 10.

c. What reasons does Paul give for the superiority of man over woman? What can you say as a response?

d. Give examples of Jesus and His outlook on women.

Day 4 Read 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

- a. Choose one of the qualities for a bishop and evaluate it for those times.

- b. What does 1 Timothy 3:11 say about the early church? Do you agree?

- c. Compare the qualifications for deacon in those days with today's.

Day 5 Read 1 Timothy 4:1-16.

- a. How did Paul answer the "men with seared consciences"?

- b. Examine your own standards by verse 4-5. If you accept 4a, do you respond as Paul advises? (Personal question)

- c. Read 1 Timothy 5:1-6. How does our society's way compare to this?

- d. Read 1 Timothy 5:7-16. Choose one of these instructions and comment on its fittingness for widows today.

Day 6 Read 1 Timothy 5:17-24.

- a. Which of these qualifications seem most fitting for today?

- b. Read 1 Timothy 6:1-16. Choose some lines that we in America today need to adopt.

- c. Read I Timothy 6:17-19. Compared to millions of people in real deprivation, all of us can be judged rich. How does verse 18 apply to us?