

The World Didn't Give it To Us (And the World Can't Take it Away)
Colossians 2:8-15
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On January 11, 2010, I am sure that hundreds of Haitians had arguments with their spouses over something trivial. Somebody forgot to do the laundry, somebody grinned too long at a woman at the grocery store, somebody spent too much on an article of clothing, somebody missed an anniversary, somebody stayed too long at a bar, somebody burned the chicken and for a few minutes, maybe even hours, the little mistake or minor transgression ballooned into a major ordeal.

On that same day, I am sure hundreds of Haitians ran into problems at work. A machine broke and could not be quickly repaired, a boss grew angry at the latest dip in sales and took her frustration out on her staff, an administrative assistant failed to order supplies and held up an important project, a computer went down taking needed data with it into the informational abyss, the heat of the day caused field workers to fall behind in the mandatory tasks of the season. People all over Port au Prince went home popping antacids troubled by the little irritations that arose on their jobs.

Without question, hundreds of Haitians spent some part of January 11th obsessing about their weight, their age, their intellect, their sex appeal, their health, their wardrobe, their hairstyle, their skills or their recreational pursuits. And just as surely, parents and children throughout the city spent some portion of Monday fighting about homework, chores, curfews, friends, clothing, diet or the volume of the music played in the house. I'm equally sure, however, that whatever was of such pressing importance on Monday, January 11th, seemed irrelevant on Tuesday, January 12th. For in the wake of the awful earthquake, only a few things mattered.

How much of our lives do we spend dealing with issues that really matter in any ultimate sense and how much time do we waste on trivial concerns?

A week ago, I had a Saturday with very few obligations. I awakened that morning delighted at my light schedule and decided, after breakfast, that I would book some airline tickets for an upcoming trip our family plans to take. I went to the computer at 10:30a.m. and called up the travel sights I often use. The fares were higher than I had anticipated so I went directly to the airlines in search of a better deal. Their fares were not any better so I began playing with the travel dates looking for some break for our family's pocketbook. After typing in a dozen or so different dates, I found a few flights that were moderately cheaper. As possibilities came up, I went to Karen, who was busily engaged in cleaning chores, and discussed the up and down side of each potential flight. After much deliberation, we decided on one flight and I typed in the information to secure the ticket. When I reached the final screen and punched the "buy ticket now" button, I received a message that the travel site couldn't complete the transaction. Not to be deterred, I went to a competitor and went through the same process only to get a message that it too was unable to confirm the purchase.

Thinking there might be a bug in that particular computer, I fired up my laptop and sought to get the tickets through that machine. Once again I reached dead-ends, so I went directly to the airline's web page, re-entered all the information and punched "buy ticket now." A new message popped up telling me they were having problems with their payment system and that I should call the number on the screen to complete my transaction over the phone. Refusing to give up, I called the number and got a robot who gave me five options, none of which dealt with my

problem. After several attempts to get the robot to understand my difficulty, I was thrown into hold where music filled my ears. Every few minutes a recording assured me that my call was of incredible importance to the company and that they would get to me any second. Time passed and then more time passed and finally a live person came on and took me through all the steps necessary to secure my ticket. When I finished, it was 1:15 p.m. I had spent almost three hours on this project. Now, ask me how much money I saved from the original fares. . . around twenty dollars. I would have rather had my morning.

Paul told the church at Colossae not to spend their lives worrying about things that didn't matter. Chief among those meaningless pressures, according to the great teacher, was the opinion of others. Some of their neighbors told the new believers that their faith in Christ was not enough to see them through life. They advocated that the Christians learn how to deal with what they called the "elemental spirits of the universe." The elemental spirits were the sun, moon and stars. Many people in the small town believed that the celestial spheres controlled the fates of people on earth. They therefore practiced a variety of rituals to placate the heavenly powers and secure their own destinies. Convinced that the Christians were naive in their dismissal of the powers of the Zodiac, they pressured them to adopt the principles of Astrology.

Paul told the Colossians not to worry about the opinion of their uneasy neighbors. "Christ," Paul said, "is more powerful than any celestial force. Keep your connection tight to Him and you'll have all the strength you need to deal with whatever may come in the future."

Other friends, colleagues and acquaintances told the believers that having faith in Christ was not enough to please God. They argued that the new Christians needed to be circumcised and keep the observances of Judaism so that God would not punish them. Again, Paul encouraged the church members to ignore the opinions of these outspoken neighbors. Your baptism, Paul said, puts you into an eternal covenant with God. When you were taken beneath the water, all your sins were washed away, and when you were raised to the surface, you were freed from the penalty of your transgressions. Forget what they are saying about you; your faith in Christ is sufficient to gain the approval, power and grace of God.

Bringing his lesson to a crescendo, Paul told the church, "If people tell you that you are disqualified from God's blessing because you don't attend the festivals for the new moon or keep Sabbath regulations or have supernatural visions or grovel in humiliation or worship angels, forget them. They are majoring on the shadows of religion, not the substance. "The substance," Paul said "is a relationship with the living Christ."

Several years ago, we had a college student who came to our church, heard the Gospel and responded gladly to it. She had come from a very difficult home life where she was condemned and criticized and was nearly ecstatic to hear that God loved her and would forgive all her sins. She prayed and told the Lord that she wanted to follow Him. She beamed with joy as she felt the spirit cleanse her from the inside out. The young woman was baptized here and immediately began to serve the Lord with great enthusiasm. Soon she was volunteering to help teach teenagers and sponsor youth trips. When we began our Open Door ministry, she went through the training to be a small group leader. Almost every Sunday, she thanked me for telling her about Christ.

Weeks passed and she came to my office in what seemed like heavy distress. In her enthusiasm to follow Jesus, she had joined a campus group that I later found listed on a cult watchdog site. The group began making heavy demands on her time. Soon they were dictating what she could wear, what she could eat, who her friends could be and what literature she could read. When they found out she attended this church, they told her she'd have to quit because we did not teach the true way. I had a series of conversations with this young woman, trying every way I knew to tell her that she should walk away from this group. Turning to Colossians and other parts of Scripture I assured her that she had all she needed with her faith in Christ and should not worry about the opinion of this group. No matter how I tried, sadly, she could not defy the pressure put on her by this religious sect. Tearfully, she told me

she had to keep the blessing of her group's leadership and she left.

Many of us are driven to please friends, relatives, bosses, teachers, neighbors and authority figures. When such significant people put pressure on us to do things their way, we have a very hard time disappointing them. But Paul said, we have to learn to do just that if they are obsessed with shadows and miss the substance of faith.

Sometimes, though, the Holy Spirit use parents, friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, experts and even acquaintances to get us back on track when we veer off on some spiritual ego trip?. So how do we know when a person's opinion of our behavior is to be regarded and when it is to be set aside? Paul said the litmus test is the guidance of Christ. We receive the guidance of Christ in two major ways. One is through the Scripture. The New Testament relates the teachings of Jesus and provides a narrative of how he lived. We can always compare advice with the teachings and life of Jesus as recorded in Scripture to see if a person's opinion has merit.

The other way we receive the guidance of Christ is through a relationship with the Holy Spirit. Days before his death, Jesus told his disciples that he had many other things to teach them but that they weren't ready to hear them. He promised the Holy Spirit would come and guide them into the truth they still needed to know. Today, that Spirit lives inside us and works to guide us in the ways that matter. The Spirit of Christ has no time for shadows of trivial religious rituals and philosophical games. Instead the Sacred Spirit always deals with the substance of life.

Usually, in my experience, the Holy Spirit works in tandem with the teachings of Scripture. In other words, when I read the Bible or study it with other Christians, the Spirit brings the teachings alive in my heart or helps me interpret them and apply them in my life. At other times, the Holy Spirit guides me on issues and decisions to which Jesus never spoke while on earth. Often other Christians have helped me discern the voice of the Holy Spirit when I have faced major decisions.

Paul said Christ our head, the center of wisdom and guidance for our lives. By learning how to tune into Christ through the study of the Bible and through the practice of prayer and listening or mediation, we allow Christ to help us focus on the thoughts and behaviors that matter to God.

Let me illustrate how this works in my own life. A few weeks ago I had to choose between competing demands. There were some tasks I needed to finish for Sunday's bulletin. A deadline was approaching for some Sunday School lessons I was under contract to write. I wanted to spend a little more time preparing our Wednesday night Bible study. A building contractor wanted to walk through our building with me. And a woman in poor health needed a pastoral visit. I knew my editor would be angry if my lessons were late. I pictured the disappointment of those who attend the Wednesday Bible study if I wasn't prepared. I knew the building contractor was a busy man and would not want me to postpone our appointment. Desa, I was sure would not want to put off printing the bulletin. And I knew the woman needed a visit.

As I began my day, I asked the Lord to help me decide what to do with my time. You know which need was most important to Jesus don't you? The visit to the ill woman clearly rose to the top as the task most in keeping with the teaching and spirit of Christ. So I disappointed a few folks and visited Dorothy Neidecker. For awhile, I wasn't even sure she knew I was there. Then she began to talk. She said, "I wonder if I've done something wrong to deserve this suffering." We discussed the possibilities and I told her that staying married to Charlie had to offset any other offenses she had made in the sight of God. Then I more seriously assured her that her pain had nothing to do with her behavior. "Dorothy, God loves you more than you can comprehend" I said. "For most of my life," she continued, "He has been true to his promises." I nodded in silence. "Well" she said, "If he's not mad at me, I'm ready to go on to heaven and let him keep the rest of His promises to me there." Dorothy died a few days later.

I'm so glad I did not spend that afternoon walking a contractor through the building or making an editor

happy. By the guidance of Christ, I did what mattered most, even though it disappointed a few folks at the time.

A few years after Paul's death, the tremors that shook the city of Colossae each day ramped up into a full scale earthquake that destroyed the city. Enough citizens died to make the rebuilding of the city an impossible task so the survivors moved off to surrounding villages and Colossae was left to turn to rubble. There is nothing on the site of the ancient city today.

What if the people in that church would have spent their remaining years trying to please all their neighbors by chasing after the shadows of religious rituals and spiritual trivialities, focusing on dietary laws and lists of dos and don'ts, never sure whether they had done enough to placate a wrathful God, the astral powers and dark angels of the air? What a waste of precious life. I am sure that the people who died in that awful quake made a beeline to Paul as soon as they entered the heavenly gates and cried, "thank you, for keeping us focused on the important matters of faith and protecting us from empty ritual."

Who knows what tomorrow will bring for any of us. One thing is sure. Sooner or later, our journey here will be done. No one here will want to look back on that day and say, "why did I spend so much time trying to please misguided people?" No, on that day, we will all want to be able to say, "thank you Christ, for leading me, through your teachings and abiding Spirit, to do the things with this life that really mattered." Amen