

WALKING THE WALK

Colossians 3: 1-11 & Hosea 11: 1-11

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What's going on in Colossae?

For a small town – what we might compare to a county seat – they sure seem to be dealing with some heady controversies. According to the pastor Epaphras at Colossae Community Church, heresy and paganism are sneaking into the theology and worship practices.

Paul has already dealt with doctrinal issues in the first two chapters of the letter, but the problems seem to extend beyond mere theology into everyday behavior. Apparently, greed, fornication, impurity, passion, and evil desire are constant temptations in this little town. Anger, malice, slander, and abusive language are slipping into the meetings where these problems are being discussed. And these Christians aren't above lying to each other, either

Gee, it sounds like they are, well, us. Not us, specifically. But us in the sense that their problems, the problems and temptations that Christians were facing in the first century are the same ones we're facing in the 21st century. Their problems aren't just *their* problems, they're our problems as well.

COLOSSAE IN THE NEWS

Just a quick glance at the newspapers or the evening news, or even popular entertainment indicates that, two thousand years later, we have not even come close to solving the Colossian problems.

The scene from the movie "Wall Street" has become iconic in film and pop culture. Gordon Gekko, a ruthless businessman played by Michael Douglas is delivering a guest address:

"The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed -- for lack of a better word -- is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms...has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed -- you mark my words -- will...save...the USA." Oliver Stone created the character of Gordon Gekko as a villain. Today, many in our culture see him as a hero, a role model.

GREED has become so commonplace that we hardly even recognize it. Hey, it's capitalism. Everyone is supposed to make as much money as they can, in any way they can, and don't even think about the consequences. It's what Ayn Rand would want, right?

In 2014 the 10 highest paid CEO's in the United States made an average of \$49,200,000 per year. Ten years later, in 2024 the 10 highest-paid CEO's in the United States made an average of \$130,170,000 per year. That's an increase of 135% in ten years. At the same time, the average American worker's salary went from \$54,000 to \$64,000 an average increase of 20% in ten years.

Steven Blair of Global Energy Balance Network published dozens of articles arguing that the cause of obesity wasn't intake of sugary foods and beverages but lack of exercise. And well he should have. Coca-Cola paid him just over \$1million dollars to write those articles.

Have you noticed that professional sports venues seem like the most patriotic places in the United States? Song sung, flags flown, jet flyovers, solder/family reunions, you name it, if it's patriotic or seems to be you can find it at a professional sporting event. And some, no doubt, are sincere. But a 2015 study sponsored by Senator John McCain proved that many of those displays were paid for by the Department of Defense. The National Guard had, in fact, paid millions of dollars to the NFL for patriotic displays featuring National Guard members during games while they were also seeking \$100 million from congress to pay for a budget shortfall.

Thee CEO of Pizza Hut makes \$8.7million per year while 25% of his employees are paid less than \$10 per hour. The CEO of Dollar General makes \$58.5 million while paying 22% of his employees less than \$10 per hour. The CEO of Wendy's makes \$13 million while 17% of his employees make less than \$10 per hour. (247WallList.com)

The Big Beautiful Bill promised to ease some of the pain for low income folks by making tips and overtime pay exempt from income tax, but only for 3 years.

FORNICATION is as popular as it ever was. Pornography is ubiquitous on the internet. Adultery is one of the most popular subjects in TV and movie dramas. And "reality shows," from the Bachelor to the Bachelorette, to the Golden Bachelor were never real and never about real romance.

Then there are the reality shows that don't even make a pretense of being about romance: Paradise Hotel, Temptation Island, Big Brother, Love in the Jungle, 90 Day Fiancé. Gosh, I wonder what those are about.

LYING, it turns out, never went out of vogue. United Airlines claimed "no charge to change your flight, ever." (Unless you were a basic economy passenger.) TINA.org, an organization that searches out deceptive advertising uncovered lies among companies that make menopause relief medications. Turns out that none of them, not one, work as advertised.

Homeaglow Inc. says they will clean your entire house for only \$19. But read the fine print as it flies by on the screen. That's only if your house can be cleaned in 3 hours and you're willing to sign on for a yearlong contract. Crooked pyramid schemes that promise you big money if you quit your job and sign on with their company are too many to name. Oh, wait. Turns out there aren't too many. TINA.com identified over 13,000 currently going on in the USA as of January of this year. Pacagen Spray promises to neutralize of 98% of cat allergens in your home. In fact, it neutralizes 98% of one allergen. There are at least 7 others.

Lying has become so commonplace that no one is surprised by it anymore. I mean, did anyone really believe that Haitian immigrants in Springfield, Ohio were stealing people's pets and eating them? Of course not. It was a lie told to our president by our vice president. And when our vice president was confronted with it, he admitted it but defended it by saying that

lying was the only way he could get the news media to care about normal Americans and he'd do it again. And most Americans only laughed. He's a politician. What do you expect?

But we are Bible believing Christians, and Scripture enjoins us to look higher than greed, sexual immorality, and dishonesty as usual.

IN THE SCRIPTURE

In today's Old Testament passage, the prophet Hosea compares God's love for Israel to that of a parent's love for a rebellious and disobedient teenager. We look at our kids and we see not just the young adult who stands defiantly before us but the little boy who sat on our lap and recited the Goldilocks story as we read it, the little girl who skipped rope on the driveway.

When our rebellious teenager angrily yells, "I didn't ask to be born!" we have to decide whether to remember that or all those times at the swimming pool when she said, "Daddy, watch me!"

According to Hosea, God decides to remember those loving times, those times when he was teaching Ephraim (Israel) to walk and, when he fell, he picked him up, cooing to him, and held him close to his face to make the hurt go away.

God thinks back to those times and says, "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will **not** execute my fierce anger..."

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, reminds us that while God has every right to be angry and aggrieved at human behavior God does not act upon that righteous anger. Instead, God chooses to put aside his fierce and righteous anger, the pain and broken heart that our rebellious ways are causing him and chooses love, and mercy, and grace when punishment is what is really warranted. Then Paul tells us how we should be responding to that loving grace which God is showing to us.

"Set your minds on things that are above!" Take the higher road. Stand above the fray. Choose the better path.

We can choose to allow things like evil desire and greed to die within us. They do not rule us; we rule them. We can choose to not be angry or abusive or malicious. We can choose to stand against our lesser selves.

We can put on Christ like we put on a new coat. And, when we do, we will discover that, surprisingly, we all look remarkably alike, in spite of our skin color, our accent, our ethnic background or our economic status.

IT'S ALL ABOUT BEHAVIOR

See, it's all about behavior.

Theology is fun -- sitting around a table at Starbucks trying to figure out what, exactly, we believe about this or that doctrine, this or that interpretation of scripture. We all enjoy doing that from time to time. But what God really wants to know is not so much what we think as what we do, especially how we treat each other.

And if this week's scripture lessons are any indication, we're not as a people, doing so hot.

Hosea tells the People of God that they are like rebellious teenagers, running wild, out of control, with no love or respect for the parents who have loved and raised them.

But be that as it may, God's grace is unending. God's heart is warmed by the very sight of us. God rushes to embrace us when we return to the family of faith. God weeps with joy at the very hint of our smile, the very promise of our embrace.

Paul provides the imperative that comes to us out of that grace. It's all about walking the walk.

He tells the Colossian Christians (and us) that it's time they started acting differently from everyone else. It's time they started acting like disciples of Jesus and forgoing things like sexual promiscuity, greed, dishonesty, abusive behavior and prejudice and start taking care of each other in a serious and sacrificial way.

After all, he says, we are all in this together.

AMEN