

Assignment 14-1

1. How does Philippians 2:1-4 relate to Philippians 2:5-11.

The common and fundamental relationship between these two scriptures is the matter of humility. Jesus freely and willingly humbled himself, even though he was originally a divine being; a divine being who was not so proud that he covetously clung to this divine status, which he had shared with God from even before the time of his incarnation. Rather, he willingly gave up his divinity to take on the lowly form of humanity in which servile state he even allowed himself to be put to death for our sake. Consequently, we should follow Jesus' example of humility, love and service towards others by caring for the wellbeing of others before caring about our own comforts, in the same way that Jesus cared for our wellbeing and our ultimate salvation through his submission to the will of God and his willingness to die in our place as a servant of humanity.

2. What is the connection between Ephesians 5:15-21 and Ephesians 5:22-6:9

In both of these scriptures Paul is describing what a faithful Christian's life should look like. In the first instance (Eph 5:15-21) he addresses individual Christian awareness and in the second instance (Eph 5:22-6:9) he describes what family life should look like. In these scriptures he addresses the following significant issues:

Ephesians 5:15-21 – Remember who you are! Do not sleepwalk through life but give yourselves over to the leading of the Holy Spirit and not to any other spirit – be it alcoholic or otherwise. Be aware of the evil age in which we live as sojourners and so constantly reflect on what is good and wholesome. In this way you will be living and following the example of Christ.

Ephesians 5:22-6:9 – Value the covenant of marriage and remember the promises you made to each other when you were married – promises to love and respect each other for the rest of your lives. Bring up your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, setting them a good example of love and respect for both young and old. Be respectful citizens of society, obeying the laws that govern the wellbeing and order of societal life.

3. What role does 1 Corinthians 13 play in the larger unit of 1 Corinthians 12-14.

1 Corinthians 12 – Spiritual gifts from God are meant to be for the benefit of the whole community of saints and not just to exalt any individual having any such gifts.

1 Corinthians 14 – The same applies to the gift of being able to speak in tongues (foreign languages), although here it is also important that such speaking is done in an orderly way and in a way that is intelligible to the Church community which is being addressed.

1 Corinthians 13 – However, all these gifts of the Spirit are worthless – of no real value to the Church community – if they are not associated with humility, love and respect towards one another in the way that they are used or received.

Assignment 14-2

Take Colossians 3:1-4 through all five steps of the Interpretive Journey.

Step 1: What did the text mean to the original audience?

Paul wrote his letter to the church in Colossae in about 60 AD when Paul was a prisoner in Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero. It seems that Paul had never been to Colossae and personally knew very few if any of the Christians there (Col 2:1). Nevertheless, Paul had obviously heard, probably from Epaphras (Col 1:7-8; 4:12) – who was a leader of the work in Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae and who had likely visited Paul – about the erroneous pagan philosophical teachings that were circulating in Colossae. It would appear that these teachings may have been a form of Gnosticism that deprived Jesus of his unique status as the Son of God and Saviour and reduced him to only one of a series of created divine beings (one of the “heavenly powers”).

It seems that Paul was afraid that the practices of asceticism, magical rites and worship of heavenly bodies, all of which were derived from elements of Gnostic beliefs, would reduce Christianity to just another pointless syncretistic religious philosophy and so deprive the Colossians of the blessings that come from “knowing Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Paul addressed this dangerous heresy by encouraging the Colossians to be careful about making sure that “no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits [*stoicheia*] of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8). In addition, Paul proclaimed to the Colossians the uniqueness and complete sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour of all of humanity. Consequently, his letter to the Colossians preached a very high Christology: “He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, ... He is before all things and in him all things hold together. ... He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:15-20).”

In the same way that Paul challenged the Galatians about their falling away from the gospel truth, here Paul also challenges the Colossians about the value, if any, of their pre-Christian beliefs and any of their current delusions, with which they may have been beguiled, by asking: “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits [*stoicheia*] of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:20-23), which can only be overcome by appropriating the vicarious and sacrificial sin offering of Jesus. Paul then concludes this challenge to the Colossians by reminding them as to how they should be viewing their Christian life and how they should be practicing the faith to which they had committed their lives: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col 3:1-4. See also Col 3:5-4:6).

Step 2: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

The Biblical audience had a particular set of problems and issues that we, in the West, mostly no longer face today but which still govern societies in other parts of the non-Western world such as India and Africa. They lived within a pagan religious society that worshipped a variety of gods and

held to a variety of superstitious philosophies and practices. At times they experienced persecution for not following the prevailing pagan social customs. Today, as Christians living in a Western society, we are living within an increasingly secular and irreligious society. Although we do not face the exact same negative influences as did the Colossian Christians, we are still being impacted by some very godless and atheistic influences that challenge our faith and our life-practices. We are currently not being persecuted for living by Christian principles, but that scenario is beginning to change in many parts of the Western world. Satan is still the same “roaring lion” (1 Pet 5:8) as he has always been, except that he changes his tactics to suit whatever historical milieu humanity may inhabit. He is the *Zeitgeist* (the “spirit of the age”); the evil spirit in every human age.

Step 3: What is the theological principle in this text?

The theological principle in this text tells us that the world with its various philosophies is not to be our source of truth or practice and has nothing to offer us that is of any eternal value. Eternal value can only be found through Jesus Christ who is the “door” through whom, and only through whom, we can enter into the glory of eternal life with God. Once we enter that narrow “door” then the road to eternal life may be hard or difficult (*thlibo*) yet it is a road that we must walk by faith if we are to know salvation and eternal life in God’s eternal kingdom (Mt 7:14).

Step 4: How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?

Both the Old and New Testaments consistently teach us that our separation from the world and our Covenant faithfulness towards God will keep us in a righteous and sanctified relationship with our God. The history of Israel in the Old Testament is a salutary lesson in what happens if we don’t remain in a faithful and Covenant relationship with God. The New Testament then further teaches us that Jesus will be our means of salvation and eternal life, as long as we remain “in Christ” (Rom 8:1) through to the very end of our lives. As such, the theological principle consistently reflects the teachings contained throughout the whole of the Bible.

Step 5: How should individual Christians today live out the theological principle?

Simply put, individual Christians can live out the theological principle by not following the sinful ideas and practices that the world (Babylon) encourages us to adopt and follow, but rather, we should always follow Christ and his example for us!

We should always remember that in this world we are but sojourners whose citizenship is in heaven “and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:20).

At the same time we should also remember that we are saved by God’s grace (by a gracious gift from God, which we should respect) because of our profession of faith in God at the time of our baptism and in what Christ Jesus has done for us and on our behalf (Eph 2:8). At the same time, the apostle Paul teaches us that our lives should always be dedicated to the service of God (Rom 12:1) and that we should “not be conformed to this world [as the Colossians were being tempted to do] but be transformed by the renewal of [our] minds,” (Rom 12:2) so that we learn to focus on what is eternal rather than what is temporary and worthless – that we lay up our treasure in heaven rather than be seeking for worldly fame and wealth here on earth (Mt 6:19-21). Here Jesus is the ultimate example for us of how we should live. Satan offered him the whole world and all of its glory but Jesus declined such an offer choosing rather to remain faithful to God his Father and to fulfilling his commission from God (Mt 4:1-10).

Assignment 14-3

Message to the Church

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today we live in what some have facetiously referred to as “interesting times.” The origin of the expression “May you live in interesting times” is commonly attributed to a traditional Chinese curse. The expression is actually ironic as “interesting” times are usually understood as being times of trouble and there is no doubt that our times are truly “interesting” and becoming more and more “interesting” as we go forward.

Around us we see all kinds of political and social changes that our forebears would have been shocked to see, let alone experience; changes that would be understood as signifying the degeneration of society to the level of what the Bible describes as being Sodom and Gomorrah. The same degenerative changes are occurring in the broader Christian community and I am distressed to even think that our relatively small community of Saints may at some time be infected to any degree with the same degenerative and demonic virus.

I am writing, therefore, out of concern and to encourage all of us that we stay awake and in constant company with the “wise virgins” so that we don’t at any time begin to slowly and progressively “quench” the Holy Spirit that is the seal of our righteousness and so be without the “oil” that represents the Holy Spirit and our righteous status before God when the time comes for us to greet the returning “bridegroom” that is our Lord and Saviour, Jesus.

I am not suggesting that anyone in our community – our ekklesia – has lost their way along the strait and narrow way that is our life’s journey towards the Kingdom, but as I look around our society and the wider world it seems obvious to me that we are living in the last days – that final 120 years – before the return of Jesus when we are told that the world will experience the same degenerative conditions that resulted in God wiping humanity off the face of the earth in the great Flood; everyone apart from only eight righteous individuals.

On an individual basis, we need to remain faithful to the covenant to which we committed ourselves at the time of our baptism and to unfailingly walk that strait but sometimes difficult road of life. We have the Commandments to guide us along this way and the Holy Days to remind us of what God is doing and how he is going about ensuring our salvation – as long as we always cooperate with him. We have ancient Israel as an example of what happens when we forget who we are and where we are going. The same lesson presents itself to us when we look at the history of the seven churches in Asia, all of which had their lampstand removed; they eventually disappeared.

We are told that Satan is a roaring lion who is looking to destroy us and when we look at the history, and especially at the more recent decades, if not centuries of church history, then we can see that Satan appears to be succeeding in his plan to thwart God and damage His salvation plan for humanity. I say, appears, because we know the final outcome and that it will be Satan who will be destroyed in Gehenna fire and not God’s plan. However, in this fight to the death, will we, who are heirs of salvation, win or lose in this fight? Will we resist the zeitgeist – the Satanic and degenerate spirit of corruption in the world – or will we be slowly coerced to succumb to its lure and pressure? That is always our choice as it was right from the very beginning for our parents Adam and Eve.

The apostle Paul in his writings to the various first-century churches lays out for us a variety of comprehensive lessons that we would do well to learn and regularly review, for it is only foolish people who refuse to learn from the mistakes of others and who would rather make the same mistakes themselves with the very same unfortunate and painful consequences. Therefore, I would encourage us all to put together a reading plan for the next years where we not just read but thoroughly work through all of the epistles in the New Testament scriptures so that we understand thoroughly and comprehensively what the God-inspired writers are teaching us about how we should live, what we should believe and even what we should avoid in our lives.

May God bless us and our families, keep us close to him at all times and teach and guide us as we faithfully walk the long and sometimes difficult road of life. Amen.

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