



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Fullness vs. Hollow

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ JULY 24, 2022

Introduction

Our scripture reading today comes from Colossians, chapter 2. Prior to the reading of that text, however, we will turn first to the book of Psalms, which begins with an illustrative image that will assist us in conceptualizing the Colossians text. Psalm 1 begins:

Blessed is the one...

²whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.

³That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

Unlike a tree that is dependent upon intermittent water in the form of rain, Psalm 1 declares that the faithful are like a tree firmly rooted and established by a constant source of nourishment—streams of water. As a result of being planted near the living water that Jesus offers, the faithful are fruitful and prosperous. They produce fruit in season which provides nourishment to sustain and support the life of the surrounding community. Additionally, because of the proximity to a constant source of nourishment, their roots grow deep and the faithful are able to withstand the onslaught of whatever winds blow our way. The image is clear: when we are rooted in the Word of God, we grow strong, we bless those around us, and we are able to withstand the winds that would assault us.

Conversely, Psalm 1 portrays those who are not rooted in the Word of God as being like chaff. Chaff is an agricultural term. It is the by-product of threshing or rubbing, stripping, or beating grain to separate the seeds from the dry, brittle, and light-weight sheaths that encase them. To separate the seeds from the sheaths, the seeds and the chaff are thrown into the air, where the winds catch the chaff and easily blow it away, while the seeds fall back safely to the ground. In other words, the one who is not rooted in God is like that chaff. Whereas the tree is rooted and firm, the chaff is blown about by any new winds that come along.

Or perhaps we could also imagine those who are not rooted in the Word of God as being like a tree that has not received the proper nourishment which, over time, has rotted and hollowed out. From glancing at the outside, the tree may appear fine. It may be tall and its trunk may appear thick and strong, but then it is tested by storm winds and the winds reveal its true health. When the winds pick up, the tree that has been hollowed reveals its weakness and splinters like a toothpick. So it is with those who are not rooted in God's Word.

Keep these images in your minds as we turn to Colossians 2:6-15. Hear now, the Word of the Lord.

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

⁹For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, ¹⁰and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. ¹¹In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was

put off when you were circumcised by Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Colossians 2:6-15

Interpretation

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians during the three years he was in Ephesus. His primary purpose was to address what has come to be referred to as the **Colossian Heresy**. Because it is a letter written to a group of people very familiar with their own ways, Paul did not need to identify specifically what the “hollow philosophy” of the Colossian Heresy was that he was addressing. They would have known it all too well. I imagine this is similar to how I do not have to identify exactly what correction I am addressing with my kids. Sometimes, I can just give them a look, and they know what I mean. Spouses, you may have a similar ability to communicate with each other with just a look. Paul’s relationship to the church meant that he did not need to address the specifics with them but, by inference, is able to address their issues.

However, this makes interpretation for the modern reader a little more difficult. What was the heresy exactly? We are left to infer from just a few vague references. The best guess of scholars has been that the Colossian Heresy was a synthesis of multiple beliefs that had infiltrated the church community. There may have been **asceticism**, which is the harsh treatment of oneself in an attempt to cultivate a deeper, spiritual life. Some have suggested that this asceticism came

from false teachers who pridefully held up their own lives with false humility and challenged others to harsh self-treatment. There may have been **ceremonialism**, or the institution of strict rules and regulations about what the faithful could eat or drink or do, perhaps drawn from Jewish ceremonial laws. There may also have been beliefs from an early form of **gnosticism**, a heresy that was formally renounced in the second century of the church because of its reliance on “special knowledge” (or *gnosis*) for salvation apart from Christ. There may have also been a reliance on **human traditions** that have nothing to do with God, but were just man-made rules or ideas. Most likely, scholars believe, it was a combination of all these things that became tangled together in the church in Colossae. What is clear is that Paul seeks to address what he refers to as “hollow philosophies”—a term which could encompass all of these ideas—that seems to have taken root.

While we may not know precisely what the heresy was, I wonder if God, in His infinite wisdom, has intentionally let the scriptures be vague. Perhaps the vagueness of the text itself enables us to hold up the hollow philosophies of our time against the person of Christ, just as Paul does in this passage.

Hollow Philosophies of the 21st Century

Like the world of Paul, the 21st century has a synthesis of various philosophies which are so intertwined they can be difficult to untangle. We might include them all under the canopy of the “family tree” of Secularism, which is a total rejection of God and of faith as the foundation for all of life. Still, even under this canopy, there are various branches or philosophies which are interconnected. I owe much of my understanding of secularism to Tim Keller’s writing on the subject. In a rather extensive footnote in his book *Making Sense of God*, Keller differentiates between several branches (which he calls “denominations”) of secularism.

First, Keller identifies a branch of secularism he deems “**Scientism**.” Scientism is not to be confused with science, which is a process that

seeks to understand the natural world by isolating variables through experimentation and testing. Science is a wonderful tool to study our world and to gain knowledge. By way of contrast, Scientism is a belief system that suggests that the only way to truth is through scientific rationality. In other words, if science cannot prove something to be true by means of the empirical method, it cannot be objectively true. Sometimes this same idea is referred to as Exclusive Rationality. Scientism or exclusive rationality limits our ability to define any moral truth, because morality, by its very nature, cannot be tested by the scientific method, and therefore the sphere of morality is not objective truth. Likewise, religion cannot be tested by the scientific method, and therefore cannot be said to be “true.”

Keller identifies a second branch or “denomination” of secularism and one that is perhaps even more hollow: **Secular Humanism**. Secular Humanism is a worldview that posits that human reason can and will lead to a moral and just world without religion. In other words, human beings and communities can be good without God. (There is actually a book written by this exact title!) Today, this idea has gone beyond saying that we do not need God or morality that has been handed down through religion in order to be “good,” but that our world is better off without religion, because religion is a great oppressor and the cause of wars throughout history. Yikes! That’s quite an oversimplification, but it is a pervasive conviction today.

A third branch or denomination is **Postmodernism**, a philosophy that relativizes truth entirely. Postmodernism suggests that what is true for you isn’t necessarily true for me because there is no such thing as objective truth.

These are three of the branches under the canopy of the tree known as Secularism which are being synthesized into various hollow philosophies. Through these philosophies, humanity is given primary authority for determining truth and creating the world and morality in our own image. Under this canopy, morals are merely social constructs that are created by consensus of humans. We can make

morality what we want it to be. What a scary thought! Human reason will make the way of morality self-evident to us as a society, we presume. For the Christian, who is convinced that all human beings are sinners with a bent moral compass such that we are always suspicious of our own thoughts and actions, these philosophies are very dangerous. Remember what Paul wrote in Colossians 2:

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

The truth is that, for some, at first, these ideas may appear to be strong and even liberating. Like a tall tree with a broad trunk, the outer appearance conveys a sense of towering strength. But inwardly, such ideas are hollow, and when tested, they splinter!

Paul's Reply to the Colossian Heresy

Against the synthesis of thought in the Colossian church, Paul argues that there is simply no substance to these hollow and deceptive philosophies. They appear, on the surface, to make sense, but they do not offer the life-giving freedom given us in Christ. Paul goes on to explain why:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness.

Whereas the philosophy of the Colossian community was hollow or empty, Christ is the fullness of the living God. Jesus offers not one way to conceptualize God among many, but Jesus is God in human form. The living God is revealed in His fullness in Christ. This makes every other philosophy which would seek to give understanding about God or the world or how we relate to one another look like a thin shadow of the Truth. Paul goes on to suggest that in Christ, we have been brought to fullness as well. When the truth of Christ enters our hearts, we are made complete and filled up to the brim.

Life is given meaning and we find our purpose. Remember when Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

This is what Colossians 2 is all about and this passage has been found to be accurate by many devout secular thinkers.

The Confession of Leo Tolstoy

He was one of the most prolific novelists of the 19th century. He was born in 1828 to an aristocratic family at his family’s estate in Polyana, about 130 miles south of Moscow, Russia. It is my conviction that God has placed parents in the lives of their children to be the primary conduits to communicate and embody the grace we have received in Christ. Unfortunately, Tolstoy lost both of his parents when he was young. His mother died when he was just two years old, his father when he was nine, and his grandmother just two months after his father. After these losses compounded, he was raised by an aunt, the nearest maternal figure to him. The loss of his family meant that his educators and peers became greater influences upon him.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a brief autobiographical piece entitled *A Confession*, in which he reflected on his life and his journey to faith. Of this time period in his early life, he wrote:

I remember that before I was eleven a grammar school pupil... visited us one Sunday and announced as the latest novelty a discovery made at his school. This discovery was that there is no God and that all we are taught about Him is a mere invention [this was in 1838]. I remember how interested my elder brothers were in this information. They called me to their council and we all, I remember, became very animated, and accepted it as something very interesting and quite possible.

For Tolstoy, his brothers, and peers, this novel idea seemed so liberating and exciting. And peer pressure played a role in its acceptance. Again, Tolstoy writes:

So that, now as formerly, religious doctrine, accepted on trust and supported by external pressure, thaws away gradually under the influence of knowledge and experience of life which conflict with it, and a man very often lives on, imagining that he still holds intact the religious doctrine imparted to him in childhood whereas in fact not a trace of it remains.

What he describes is what many experience today, even those who have grown up in the faith. External pressures that come to us, often from friends or our surrounding culture, can weaken our faith and expose us to a hollow philosophy that carries us away from God. At first those false ideas seem plausible (perhaps even liberating), but if they take root they cause our faith to come crashing down. Then, Tolstoy writes (and I love this image, about how the faith of these comes crashing down), it's like "the push of a finger on a wall that was ready to fall by its own weight."

So, Tolstoy abandoned his faith at a young age. While he longed to be a good person, he found that his life turned to the pursuit of ambition and pleasure and success and the admiration of his peers and affirmation of the world. Immorality was glorified in his circles, so he wandered far from the Lord for many years. It was during these years that he wrote several of his most influential works, including *War and Peace*. Yet, despite his success, he was deeply unsatisfied, and empty.

He moved to St. Petersburg and spoke with his peers in the writing community and asked them about the purpose of their work. They replied that their chief vocation was to teach humanity, but Tolstoy reflects that no one could agree on what they were to teach. Still, rather pridefully, they continued writing as though their thoughts were creating culture and helping the world progress, but the substance of what they taught and where the world was moving, they could not say. What's more, he looked at the quality of the lives of his peers and was revolted. And, worse, he revolted himself. Still, he devoted himself to a belief—or as he describes it, a religion—in **progress**. Humanity is moving somewhere by our own reason and creativity.

But he couldn't shake his questions. Tolstoy was plagued by questions of purpose. What did it all mean? What is it for? What does it all lead to? In his confusion, he writes that his purpose became self-perfection. He poured himself into his studies of the sciences and philosophy, and in them he found nothing. Throughout his autobiographical work, he outlines all the hollow philosophies he explored and their respective weaknesses. And, worse, his faith in progress began to thaw. He writes, "[An] instance of a realization that the superstitious belief in progress is insufficient as a guide to life, was my brother's death..."

In the face of his greatest questions about the meaning of life and in the face of death, he found an "appalling poverty of thought" in all the philosophies of the world. In all their hollowness, they could not explain life or death or suffering or provide any solace. The questions about life and its purpose persisted. He became consumed by the question, "What meaning has life that death does not destroy?" One day, a peaceful thought pierced through the fog of his depression and confusion: "Union with the eternal God."

Over a period of about three years, he would wrestle with his secular philosophical ideologies which he struggled to abandon, but would be ministered to in lucid moments when he felt a fullness of life enter him. He prayed over and over during those three years for the Lord to save him. And over time, God would lead him to a faith in the God of the Scriptures. Tolstoy wrote:

Formerly life itself seemed to me full of meaning and faith presented itself as the arbitrary assertion of propositions to me quite unnecessary, unreasonable, and disconnected from life... Now on the contrary I knew firmly that my life otherwise has, and can have, no meaning... that only these propositions presented by faith give life a meaning.

I had indeed come to faith because, apart from faith, I had found nothing...

Tolstoy sought meaning from humanity and the hollow philosophies of the world, and found that there is no meaning outside of faith in Christ.

The Most Reluctant Convert

Perhaps some of you saw the recent film about the life of C.S. Lewis entitled *The Most Reluctant Convert*. It portrays how one of the most brilliant secular minds of the 20th century came to faith in Jesus Christ and became known for his compelling religious writings—both fiction and non-fiction.

Like Tolstoy, Lewis's mother died when he was fairly young—only nine years old. Unable to deal with his wife's loss, Lewis's father sent him away to boarding school where his primary influences would be his peers and educators. Like Tolstoy, Lewis became decidedly an atheist. He wrote to a friend at age seventeen:

I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint Christianity is not even the best.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis writes about what brought him out of atheism to Christianity. He describes God's overwhelming pursuit of him as being like a master chess player. With each move, Lewis was beginning to feel pinned, until—checkmate—there was nothing he could do but surrender to faith in Jesus.

God kept surrounding Lewis with Christians, both as friends and colleagues; he was even being drawn to the work of Christian writers. When he was studying English at Oxford, he became fast friends with Nevill Coghill (the literary scholar known for his modern English version of *The Canterbury Tales*), who he described as the most informed and intelligent kid in class, and who was a Christian. Oddly, his life also matched his faith. He was gentle and kind and chivalrous. This was one of God's chess moves to pierce Lewis's heart.

Seemingly against his will, Lewis found himself drawn to Christian writers. Not only did he find them to be superior to secular thinkers, but their writings portrayed an absolute truth which no secular writ-

ers could muster: one that was filled with beauty, truth, and goodness. He would write about one of his beloved influences, George MacDonald:

George MacDonald had done more to me than any other writer; of course it was a pity he had that bee in his bonnet about Christianity.

And of another influential literary convert to Christianity, G.K. Chesterton, he wrote:

Chesterton had more sense than all the other moderns put together; bating, of course, his Christianity.

Over and over, Lewis was compelled by the reality that the leading thinkers had something to offer which was full of pulsating life. He ultimately concludes:

Those writers who did not suffer from religion and with whom in theory my sympathy ought to have been complete—Shaw and Wells and Mill and Gibbon and Voltaire—all seemed a little thin; what as boys we called ‘tinny.’ It wasn’t that I didn’t like them. They were all entertaining; but hardly more. There seemed to be no depth in them. They were too simple. The roughness and density of life did not appear in their books.

Then, after long talk with renowned writer and dear friend J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis finally converted to Christianity and became the most reluctant convert.

You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929, I gave in, and admitted that a God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

Conclusion

These were some of the leading thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries who had been carried off by hollow philosophies, but the Lord

would not let them stay there. Eventually, they were pursued and captured by the incredible love of God in Jesus Christ.

The faithful one is like a tree planted by streams of water. The faithful are fruitful; the full life of Christ pulsates in and through them. But not so with those who are taken captive by the hollow philosophies of the world. I imagine that there are some here today who have walked down the road of hollow philosophy and been taken captive only to find that there is no satisfaction there. I imagine that there is one person today who is still held captive, who is struggling against God with all of their might, trying to be the most reluctant convert. Here is the truth: You can spend your whole life running from God. In the end, nothing else will solve the aching hollowness of the world apart from Christ.

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness.

Colossians 2:9

Amen.

