

Title: Who's Team Are You On  
Immerse: Messiah, the letters of Paul part 2  
Text: Ephesians 2:12-14, Philemon 1:15-16, Colossians 2:11, Colossians 2:16-17, and Colossians 3:11  
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Date: 10-20-2019

Can we give a round of applause to Daniel and Liane for that. That was awesome, thanks guys. That was a really powerful example of remembering our priorities.

It's really easy to get caught up in the competition and rivalry. One time we had some extended family visiting from California just in time for the Vikings/49ers game. The smack talk had started ten minutes into the game and now it's the fourth quarter. So the room was tense. In the final seconds the Niners had Minnesota on the ropes. We had possession but it was 3<sup>rd</sup> down and we had over 30 yards to go. Then Brett Favre, cause we had him that year, pulls back and bombs an impossible pass downfield into the waiting arms of Greg Lewis, touchdown. Half the room exploded. We cheered, we hugged, we rubbed it in their faces, the word gracious disappeared from our vocabulary. So the room was still tense but now for a brand new reason. Then, I'm not proud to say, we all went upstairs and faked nice happy faces for a family picture. It was my grandma's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. That's why the extended family was here. Like I said, it's easy to get carried away.

Quick all play question for everyone. Who here loves football? What is your team? So I'm seeing around the room that we have a bunch of traitors in our mix. (Slide 2) It's alright, it's alright, Jesus forgives (mock spirituality/christianese here).

Just out of curiosity does anybody know how many teams are in the NFL? (answer: 32) (If anybody says "a lot" highlight it otherwise respond with "a lot, so many to choose from" to one of the answers)

But as many choices as football fans have today there were ten times as many choices in front of the people in our Immerse reading this week. And as much as I know the choice of team allegiance feels like life or death the choices these people had to make were actually life and death.

(Slide 3) The Immerse reading for this week dove into many of Paul's letters; three of which I will be highlighting today, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon. Now before you ask yes these three do have a very important connection; they were all sent and delivered at roughly the same time. Colossians and Philemon were sent to the church in Ancient Colosse. Ephesians, despite the name, was meant to be passed around to churches Paul himself had not planted or visited. But beyond the timeline connection there is a far more important thematic connection; in all three letters Paul is talking about the hierarchy of identity. Paul identifies three key identities of his audience that must be

subjugated to, be less important than, their new identity in Christ. The identities Paul tackles are race, class, and religious identities.

You see here is where the life or death choices come in. In ancient Turkey there were a vast number different kinds of people (Slide 4). There were people from at least three separate continents, Africa, Asia, and Europe. And uncountable countries and cultures. You can see in front of you some of the major ones. These three here (laser pointer) had been in the area since before there was writing or even farming, pre-history people. There were the easterners, people like the Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Medes, and countless others. They are the natives, this is their homelands. (Slide 5) There were the Phoenicians, a powerful seafaring people. If you happen to recognize that headdress from your David and Goliath storybooks the Philistines were a particular people group under the Phoenician culture group. (Slide 6) And finally you had Greeks from the Greek colonies along the western coast of Turkey. They immigrated to the area early so when other people came they almost seemed like natives by comparison. These three people groups had been in the area the longest and would have thought of ancient Turkey as their home. (Slide 7) The next newcomers were the Jews, like Daniel, brought to the area by the Babylonians. Daniel is sent to the lion's den by a Babylonian king, a native of Ancient Turkey. (Slide 8) Then more Greeks and Macedonians came from mainland Greece under the military leadership of Alexander the Great, pretty boy. (Slide 9) Then Celts, you know like the foundation of Irish lineage, moved in settling in a little mountainous province called Galatia. (Slide 10) Finally the Romans came and conquered the area leaving large garrisons and bringing immigration from crowded Italy.

Confused? Well imagine how the people living it felt. So many cultures and peoples shoved together and none of them particularly interested in sharing. Every day was a constant struggle to climb to the top of the pile and the only people that you could trust, or maybe even just understand, were those in your group.

Isn't this fight true in our lives too? We have all had that gut punch moment when we realize one of our friends thinks, voted, or acts differently than we do. We like them and we assumed they were part of our group but then we find out they're not. Suddenly we don't feel as safe around them and we might even pull back, scared of the difference.

Into this reality Paul writes a potent challenge to the Gentiles in Ephesians 2:12-14 (Slide 11)

**<sup>12</sup> In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. <sup>13</sup> But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.**

Did you catch that? Paul writes that Gentiles, anyone not a Jew, are united with Jews as one people. When Jesus died on the cross he not only put to death our sin but also the racial and cultural divisions that turned people against one another. In this intensely culturally divided land Paul calls for Christians to recognize that they are one people in Christ.

But Paul isn't done there. He drives on to the division of class. The division between classes was a lot wider in ancient times. This was the age of Kings and Nobles, Patrons and Commoners, and Freeman and Slaves. Almost as important as your cultural identity, your social standing determined your rights, legal protections, marriage, work, and your freedom. We have all seen those movie scenes where the rich and powerful elite look down on the lowborn commoner just for being who they are. (Slide 12) I mean Disney almost makes whole movies around just that idea. Most stark of these distinctions was between slave and free. In Rome out of every 10 people 4 of them would have been slaves. In Ancient Turkey this proportion was likely lower but there still would have been a large number of people who had little to no freedom.

Again Paul challenges the cultural expectations in Philemon 1:15-16 when he writes to a Christian slave owner (Slide 13):

**<sup>15</sup> It seems you lost Onesimus [your slave] for a little while so that you could have him back forever. <sup>16</sup> He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.**

Onesimus's status as a slave would mean that he, in the eyes of his world, wasn't worthy of sitting at the same table as his master. (Slide 14) Look at this picture, everyone is eating and seems to be having a good time. But what's this? Here's the slave, away from the table, holding a bowl. That job could be filled by furniture but they are having a human being do it.

Where do we treat people like furniture? Do we forget the waiter might be having a rough day? Do we walk past that homeless person like they aren't even there? Do we trust a famous person more than their accuser just because?

So when Paul tells the master and slave that they are brothers, members of the same family, reborn into the same standing (social class) as children of God it is radical, then and now. If a slave and master could be brought to the same level by the Lord so too could every other class distinction (a homeless Christian and Dave Ramsey are brothers in Christ).

The beautiful thing was Paul was writing to churches that were already working towards cultural and class unity. They were mixed bodies of Gentile and Jew, slave and free, slowly but surely putting aside other identities for the sake of Christian unity. But there was one more division far more damaging than the others because it was easily disguised

as God's will. I'm talking about religious distinctions, doctrinal disputes within the body that threatened to split it and we sadly know did, later on, split the church.

(Slide 15) The main doctrinal dispute in the ancient church was between those who felt that all believers must conform to the law of Moses and those that believed that Jesus had fulfilled the law. Similar to our modern arguments on baptism the crux of the issue revolved around how symbolic acts like circumcision and eating kosher should be carried out and if they were requirements. Gentiles wishing to become Jews in the past had been required to do this so why were new Christians any different. This view ignored the absolutely earth-shaking event of the crucifixion and Paul says as much. In Colossians 2:11 he writes. (Slide 16)

**<sup>11</sup> When you came to Christ, you were “circumcised,” but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature.<sup>1</sup>**

He then goes on to make it absolutely abundantly clear that doctrinal distinctions have no power over the body of Christ. In Colossians 2:16-17 he writes.

**<sup>16</sup> So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. <sup>17</sup> For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.**

The rules and symbolic acts are just that, symbolic. They reflect the reality rather than being it. The Jews insisting upon Gentile circumcision and kosher eating were missing the point and dividing the body while doing it. They were trying to maintain the old Jewish identity and indeed many Jews, and even some Christians, still are. But Jesus came to bring a new identity. New!

Paul writes in Colossians 3:11. (Slide 17)

**<sup>11</sup> In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile,<sup>[c]</sup> circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized,<sup>[d]</sup> slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.**

Let me read that again. (Paraphrase)

In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Man or Woman, Black or White, Liberal or Conservative, Catholic or Protestant, Asian or Hispanic, First World or Third World, Western or Eastern, Midwestern or Southern, East Coast or West Coast, Bible Belt or Silicon Valley, Rural or Urban, rich or poor, middle class or lower class, Baptist or Lutheran, Bishops or Pastors, Baptism or Dedication, Married or Single, Drumsets or Organs, extravert or introvert, Artsy or Sporty, Nerdy or Popular, Outdoorsy or Homebody, Star Wars or Star Trek, Tolkien or Martin, Viking or Packers, LeBron or Michael, Jazz or Rock, Rap or Country, Beetles or Stones, or whether you just like the color blue more than the color red. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us. (Slide 18)

Not all Christians are the same. If God had meant us to be he would have made a bunch of robots. But we are on the same team. If we forget that then we are no better than this feuding and broken world that surrounds us.

The world and the enemy want nothing more than a divided church. When people are divided they are weak, they are easy to control, they can't change anything. Jesus wants nothing more than a united church. A church, that wins by inviting our enemies in. A church, that stands strong in the face of false division and petty fights. A church, that changes everything. A church, that never forgets that every last person on this earth is a child of God. That was true in Ancient Turkey in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century and it is true in Apple Valley in 2019.

If you happen to be watching the game today root for your team, have fun sticking it too those poor Detroit fans who are about to lose. But remember that Christ is in Detroit, and some of those people wearing blue are our family.