HE’S STILL WORKING ON ME

Colossians 2:6-7

Some of you will remember this once popular Joel Hemphill song from the 80s maybe:

*He’s still working on me to make me what I ought to be.*
*It took Him just a week to make the moon and stars,*
*The sun and the earth and Jupiter and Mars.*
*How loving and patient He must be, He’s still working on me.*

*There really ought to be a sign upon the heart,*
*Don’t judge her yet, there’s an unfinished part.*
*But I’ll be perfect just according to His plan*
*Fashioned by the Master’s loving hands.*

*He’s still working on me …*

That’s one of the most encouraging truths in the Bible: God continues to work on us, sanctifying, shaping, molding, creating the person He wants us to be. We are all unfinished products. But we are *not left* in the corner of some garage or in the back of a closet or in a dust-filled attic, pretty much forgotten and ignored. We are in the middle of the studio floor in easy reach of the shaping hand of God. God is *still* working on us—when it’s apparent and when it’s not.

We’re going to spend this Sunday and next in our “Come On In Carnival”—making you aware of *opportunities* you have this school year to learn and to serve. One of our core values as a church is that people grow spiritually by both learning and doing. Like inhaling and exhaling, spiritual health involves receiving and giving, learning and serving. If all one does is learn, he gets fat and lazy. If all one does is serve, she eventually fizzles, pops, and burns out. Spiritual growth, spiritual health, involves both.

I invite you to open your Bible this morning to *Colossians 2:6-7.*

Paul *wrote this letter* from prison to both encourage the church and correct false teaching that was being smuggled into the congregation. Paul’s prayer for the church as we read in 1:9-10 is that they …
may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

There it is again: **spiritual health** is about receiving and giving, learning and serving, knowing God and walking in a fruit-bearing manner worthy of Him. And in our text this morning, Paul gives primary attention to the receiving, learning side of spiritual health, about how God works on us and what He wants to accomplish as He shapes us to be what He wants us to be. Hear the word of the Lord ... *(read the text)*.

I

**Paul reminds us of who we are:** “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him ....”

This Colossian church was full of people who were once something other than Christians. This city, located in what is now south-central Turkey, was a cosmopolitan hodgepodge of dispersed Jews, indigenous Phyrigians, and immigrant Romans sent to run the place for the empire. So marinating in the culture was a dash of the moral code of Moses, a cup of pagan mystery religious activities, and a sprinkling of the high-minded, speculative philosophy of the Greeks and Romans. It was a hodgepodge, a mish-mash of religious ideas and practices.

And then Jesus came to town. He most likely came in the person and preaching of a man named *Epaphras* who probably was converted to Christ through the preaching of Paul in nearby Ephesus (1:7-8). Epaphras preached the gospel and planted a church. He got a hearing. The Holy Spirit went to work. And out of this cultural mix and religious minestrone, some of those folks came to receive Jesus as Lord.

Man-made philosophies and empty deceit were starting to infiltrate the church so Paul reminds these Christians in Colossae of just who they are: those who “have received Christ Jesus the Lord.”

Paul is not talking about someone praying the *sinner’s prayer*: “Lord Jesus, I know I’m sinner. Forgive me for my sin. I give my life to you as Savior
and Lord.” No, not the sinner’s prayer. These are people who have already received Christ Jesus the Lord. They have believed the gospel: that Jesus died for their sins and rose from the dead and that only Jesus can save them from their sins and give them real life, abundant life, eternal life. They have already declared that Jesus is Lord—Lord over the individual, Lord over the powers and principalities of the world, Lord over all.

We sometimes forget that when we receive Jesus, we receive Him as Lord. To hear some Christians talk and to notice the way they live, you’d think Jesus was a split-personality. You’d think there were two Jesus’: Jesus the Savior and Jesus the Lord. You hear it in testimonies. “When I was 11, I trusted Jesus as my Savior, but when I was 24, I trusted Him as Lord.” What? Jesus didn’t become your Lord until you were 24? You mean we get to choose to either have Jesus as Savior or Lord? Hey, that’s pretty convenient because that means I can have all the benefits of salvation without any transformation of life. That means I can say Jesus is my Savior but still live life on my terms, still live like a selfish jerk, still have sex with whomever I want whenever I want, still amass wealth without generosity or care for the poor or the kingdom of God, still decide how involved I will be in Jesus’ church. That’s a heck of a deal! No, it’s a hell of a deal because hell is where these folks are heading all the time. Their attitude bears that out. They aren’t serious about Jesus. They have no sense of need for Jesus.

There is only one Jesus—our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All Christians are on a journey of growth in Jesus and with Jesus. None of us ever completely arrive this side of heaven. We may still struggle with the sins that easily beset us. We may wrestle with seasons of discouragement, depression, and doubt. But we continue to take all these things to Jesus and let Him grow our lives through this stuff so there is more of Jesus and less of us, so that our lives look more and more like Jesus and less and less like average Joe Pagan. When we receive Jesus as Savior, we receive Him as Lord.

Jesus is Lord. That’s who is He is. He cannot not be Lord. Pastor Tim Keller said that in 1970 a Sunday school teacher changed his life with a simple illustration.

The teacher said, "Let's assume the distance between the earth and the sun (92 million miles) was reduced to the thickness of this sheet of paper. If that is the case, then the distance between the earth and the nearest star would be a
A stack of papers 70 feet high. And the diameter of the galaxy would be a stack of papers 310 miles high."

Then Keller’s teacher added, "The galaxy is just a speck of dust in the universe, yet Jesus holds the universe together by the word of his power."

Finally, the teacher asked her students, "Now, is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your assistant?" Jesus is not our assistant. Jesus is not our ace-in-the-hole. Jesus is not a crutch we lean on when times are tough. Jesus is not a salesman peddling hell insurance. Jesus is not just our Savior. Jesus is Lord. And when you receive Jesus, that’s the Jesus you get—"Christ Jesus the Lord."

And His lordship is going to show up in our lives. That’s why Paul writes, “so walk in him.” God expects us to apply the truth of Christ’s lordship in our lives—our values, our behavior, our thought-life, our relationships, our politics, our work, our play—every area. No area can be fenced off or shut out. No area. A pastor preached a stirring sermon on the lordship of Christ and Christ’s call to surrender our lives in full obedience to Him. After the sermon, a woman approached the pastor and told him of her struggle in this area. She believed in Christ, but she still was afraid to obey Him fully for fear of what He might expect of her. The pastor invited her to sit beside him on the first pew, and he opened her Bible to Acts 10:14. This verse is the response of Peter to a vision in which the Lord told Peter to take and eat animals that the Jews considered unclean. This would be a traumatic vision for a Jew. And Peter responded to the Lord’s call in this way, "By no means, Lord." The pastor gave the woman a pencil and told her to underline the words she wanted to mark her life. She could either underline "by no means," or she could underline "Lord." The pastor told her that she could not underline them both. "If Jesus is your Lord," he explained, "you can’t say, 'by no means.' And if you tell Jesus, 'by no means,' then Jesus is not your Lord. You decide which it will be."

But the truth is: if your faith is sincere, you already decided which it will be when, as Paul writes, “you received Christ Jesus the Lord.”

So Paul reminds the Colossian church and us who we are—we are those who have received Jesus as Lord. But that’s not the end of the process.
Paul reminds us of what God continues to do in our lives. The gospel is not just to get us to heaven. The gospel is also for all the life we live before we get there. God continues to work in our lives after we receive the Lord Jesus. Paul writes that we are “rooted and built up in him and established in the faith.” Paul is mixing his metaphors here: rooted is a plant image; built up is a construction image; established is a business image. Now, established is not technically a metaphor. Some translate the word established as strengthened. That’s the sense of it—strengthened, confirmed, established. I like the word established because it reminds me of signs I’ve seen on businesses: “Martin and Son, Established 1965.” I might have been born in 1956, but Jesus hung an “Under New Management” sign over the business of my life when I received Him as Lord. These images remind us that we are not yet finished products. When we receive “Christ Jesus the Lord,” God doesn’t pat us on the head, say, “Good luck,” nudge us out of His way, and then go after other folks while ignoring us. No. God still works on us. He grows us up. He transforms us more and more into the image of Jesus.

And this spiritual growth doesn’t solely depend upon us. The passive mood of these verbs focuses on God’s work in our being rooted and built up and established in the faith. God roots us in Christ when we receive Him as Lord. God builds us up through His discipline—through bringing brokenness in our lives that causes us to depend on Him and grow deeper in faith and hope and love. And God establishes us in the faith as we learn more and grow deeper into God’s Word and Christian teachings and Christian community. God does this for us.

But He invites us to join in the process—“established in the faith, just as you were taught.” We need to put ourselves in venues where we can be taught—worship, small group Bible studies, women’s and men’s studies, marriage and parenting classes, financial peace university, reading quality Christian writings. Do you put yourself in places where you can be taught? What are you doing intentionally these days to join God in growing you up in Christ? What are you doing to build on what God is building in you? Are you growing in your understanding of His word? Are you spending time in prayer and continuing the conversation through the day? Are you serving the Lord? Spiritual growth doesn’t depend solely on us, but God calls us to be taught the truths by which we live our lives. God uses all of this to grow us up in Him. It’s the way He keeps on working in our lives.
And then Paul shows us where God’s good work in our lives takes us in this life: “abounding in thanksgiving.” Abounding is an active verb. This is our job and the fruit of what God does in our lives—to abound, or as the NIV translates the word, to overflow with thanksgiving. This is a true witness to the Holy Spirit within us. Thanksgiving recognizes the true nature of grace—that all of life is a gift from God. Thanksgiving exercises faith—that all things work for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Thanksgiving minimizes anxiety and worry—thankful people know that just as God has been faithful in the past, He will be faithful in the future. Thanksgiving leads to joy—thankful people are joyful people because their joy is rooted not in changing circumstances but in the unchanging nature of God, the most joyous Being in the universe.

You may remember Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian missionary, in Beirut, Lebanon, who was held captive for sixteen months by Shiite Muslims. He was kept in chains in a small room, blindfolded most of the time. He had no control over anything that happened to him. But Weir recognized even this evil that had befallen him as a means by which God could root, build up, and establish him in the faith. And the fruit of his faith was abounding thanksgiving. This is a report from one of the early days of captivity.

I awoke refreshed by my nap. What other gifts would God show me in addition to sleep, a blanket, and a spirit of resistance and survival? Once again I lifted my blindfold and began examining the room. What was here that could bring me close to the sustaining presence of God? I let my imagination have total freedom.

Looking up, I examined an electric wire hanging from the ceiling. The bulb and socket had been removed so that it ended in an arc with three wires exposed. To me, those wires seemed like three fingers. I could see a hand and an arm reaching downward—like the Sistine Chapel in Rome, Michelangelos’s fresco of God reaching out his hand and finger toward Adam, creating the first human being. Here God was reaching toward me, reminding me, saying, “You’re alive. You are mine; I’ve made you and called you into being for a divine purpose.”
What else? I began counting the horizontal slats of the shutters outside the French doors. There were 120. What could those horizontal pieces of wood stand for, so many of them? That’s it! Many of them, a crowd! A cloud of witnesses past and present, who through times of trial have observed the faithfulness of God. .... This recital of the basics of my faith sent a chill through me. What a message! I desperately needed it in my present setting.

Then my eyes lighted on two white circles near the ceiling, one on the right-hand wall, the other on the left. Everybody in Lebanon knows what they are, plastic covers for electrical connections. Yet, what could they be for me? What comes in pairs? Ears! They were the ears of God. The Lord hears the groaning of the saints. So listen to me, dear God; I also surrender to your care and will.

By the end of the day, Weir was humming the hymn, “Count your many blessings, name them one by one.” He counted: health, life, food, mattress, pillow, blanket, his wife, his family, faith, hope, prayer, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Father’s love. Thirty-three things in all.¹

It’s safe to say that Benjamin Weir, even in a difficult situation, was “abounding in thanksgiving.” Thanksgiving, not worry and whining and complaining and comparing, but thanksgiving marks the lives of those who receive Christ Jesus the Lord and grow deeper and deeper in Him.

God is doing His part in growing us up in Jesus.

IV

Get in on this by doing your part. Out in the foyer today, you can discover all kinds of opportunities to put yourself in venues where you can grow, venues where God can root you, build you up, and establish you in the faith. You need to take advantage of some of these opportunities. If you’re not in a Connect Group Bible study, you need to be. If you’re not making investments of time and energy in your spiritual health and growth, you need to be. Jesus is your Lord and He calls you to open your life to His shaping,

sanctifying, transforming work, around His word, in community. Christian psychologist Henry Cloud reminds us, “Transformation requires grace plus truth plus time.” We don’t get there over night, but we do get there over time in a growing fashion.

And it’s your responsibility as a Christ-follower to learn more and grow deeper in Jesus by making time to do so. You make time to fix up your deer camp, right? You make time to follow the Razorbacks, right? You make time to get yourself and your kids involved in more activities than you can reasonably manage, right? Is hunting your Lord? How about the Razorbacks or your kids or your latest hobby—are any of these your Lord? Do any of these save you from your sin and root, build up, and establish you in the faith and in God’s love through the twists and turns and ups and downs of life in this broken world? Enjoy those things—they are gifts of God—but not at the expense of your growth in Christ Jesus the Lord. Make time for the Lord Jesus. Open yourself to opportunities to be taught, opportunities to grow deeper in Jesus, to explore and discover, as Paul said to the Ephesians, “how wide, how long, how high, and how deep God’s love is” (3:18). God continues working in our lives to this good end.

Joel Hemphill is right:

He’s still working on me to make me what I ought to be.
It took Him just a week to make the moon and stars,
The sun and the earth and Jupiter and Mars.
How loving and patient He must be, He’s still working on me.

Open your life for His good work because He’s also still working on you.

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