

Gospel Prime – The Preeminence of Christ in Colossians

Gospel Primacy: Christ the Firstborn (Colossians 1:15-20)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on October 6, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ We began our newest sermon series last week, going through the book of Colossians. We only looked at the letter's introduction, which is mainly a section of thanksgiving. But we made a point to connect, even those verses, to Paul's larger purpose for writing. He's writing to address the growing presence of false teaching in the church. **There was teaching going around that undermined the sufficiency of Christ for salvation.** It was saying that being "in Christ" – being united with him by faith – was a good start but not enough. There was an entire system of spirituality you also had to adopt.
 - If you look in chapter 2:18, Paul identifies a particular individual behind this. There was a false teacher passing judgment on the Colossian believers. Deeming them disqualified. Making them feel spiritually incomplete, spiritually inadequate. *¹⁸Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the Head.*"
- ❖ Now that was the problem. Whoever this was, he wasn't holding fast to the Head, to Christ. **Instead he was holding fast to his system of spirituality that insisted on asceticism – a severe form of self-discipline.** It's about the punishment of the body – where you're either actively harming yourself or passively withholding good things like food and drink – all as a means of resisting sin and combating the flesh. Paul calls it "*self-made religion*" in chapter 2:23.
 - And then there was this emphasis on worshipping angels. Apparently this false teacher was saying that Christians are still susceptible to attacks from evil spirits. They're called "*elemental spirits of the world*" in chapter 2:8 and 2:20. So he's saying you still need to call upon angels for protection. You need to pray to them or worship them, in a sense.
 - What's the main problem here? **The main problem is that this kind of teaching is turning believers and their attention towards themselves or towards angels – but not towards Christ.** Now no one was denying Christ. No one was saying he wasn't necessary for salvation. But they *were* saying that Christ was not enough. He must be supplemented by this or that system of spirituality.
- ❖ But the problem is, as Alistair Begg likes to say, "*A Christ supplemented is a Christ supplanted.*" **The minute you try to add to Jesus, you've let go of Jesus.** You're no longer holding fast to him. That's Paul's accusation in chapter 2:18. This false teacher is "*not holding fast to the Head.*"
 - Now notice how, in our text, in chapter 1:18, Paul describes Jesus as "*the head of the church*". **What he's doing is that he's setting up an argument to defend the sufficiency of Christ for salvation in chapter 2 – by exalting the supremacy of Christ in chapter 1.** Because Christ is all-supreme, he is all-sufficient to save.
- ❖ **Christians in the Colossian church back then – and Christians in our church right now – are bombarded with messages that tell us we're not enough.** We're not complete. We're not adequate. We need to do more and be more. We need to adopt this or that system of spirituality if we want to experience the fullness of God and his salvation.

- ❖ Now here in Colossians, we're dealing with someone who has malicious intent. **But in my experience, many times preachers and teachers create the same effect and make you feel spiritually inadequate – but without meaning to.** Growing up in church, I heard preachers and retreat speakers who I'm sure were just trying to encourage me by sharing what they do for their devotions – how they wake up really early and spend this amount of time in the Word, or prayer, or fasting. Or they're just describing how they dated their wife and how they never kissed until their wedding day. And I'll give the benefit of doubt that it was all meant to be descriptive.
 - **But if we're not careful, these personal experiences get interpreted as prescriptive.** This becomes a standard – a system of spirituality – that other Christians think they must adopt. I know I thought that. I felt spiritually inadequate or incomplete until I adopted this preacher or speaker's way of walking with Christ.

- ❖ The Christian response to these feelings of inadequacy is the same as it was back then. **The Christian response is to exalt Christ – to demonstrate his adequacy.** His supremacy. His preeminence. And that's what Paul is doing in our passage.
 - Commentators describe it as a hymn. Whether Paul borrowed it or created it, we're not sure. But it's considered hymn-like because of its lyrical structure and the way words are repeated and sound similar in the original language. What we're going to see is how this hymn has two parts to it. In the first, Paul is exalting the supremacy of Christ over creation. And in second, he's exalting the supremacy of Christ over the church, which can be seen as a new creation. There are interesting parallels here, which are all intended to help us to find our adequacy, our completeness, in Christ.

The Supremacy of Christ Over Creation

- ❖ Let's begin by looking at vv15-17 and Paul's emphasis on the supremacy of Christ over creation. Now I see three ways in which Christ is supreme. **First, he is supreme in that he reveals all of God from all eternity.** I see this in first part of v15, "*He is the image of the invisible God.*"

- ❖ God is invisible. Which means we can't know him unless he reveals himself. But that's the point here. **God is revealed – fully and perfectly – in the Son.** Before time began, from all eternity past, the Son has imaged forth God. He has revealed God.
 - **Hebrews 1:3** affirms the same truth. It says, "*He (the Son) is the radiance of the glory of God.*" **The Son radiates the glory of God like sunbeams radiate the glory of the sun in the sky.** Do you realize when you look at a sunset, you're not actually seeing the sun itself. What you're seeing are sunbeams that have radiated from the sun, traveling at the speed of light, finally reaching your eyes. If it were not for the sunbeam, you wouldn't see the sun. **The sunbeam and the sun are not different – but they are distinct.**
 - In the same way, God the Father and God the Son are not different – but they are distinct. **And if it weren't for the Son, you wouldn't see the Father.** The eternal Son radiates the glorious image of God.

- ❖ This “*image of God*” language is reminiscent of Genesis 1. Where man, we’re told, was made in the image of God (Gen 1:27). **I think what Paul is saying is that the original image of God – that image all humanity is patterned off of – is the preexistent, eternal Son of God.** If you want to know who you’re supposed to be – what kind of person you’re meant to become – Paul is saying, “Look to the Son of God.”
 - Now connect this back to the problem at hand. The false teacher was no longer holding fast to the Son. He was teaching people how to be close to God, how to be filled with God, but he wasn’t telling them to look to the Son. **But how can they grow in God if they aren’t shown the image of God?**

- ❖ **Imagine working on a thousand piece puzzle – but without the box.** Without the box, you’re without the image on the box. And without the image on the box, you have no idea what you’re making or what you’re doing.
 - The Son of God is like the image on the box. **Without looking to the Son, you have no idea who God is and no idea who you’re supposed to be as one created in his image.** Without looking to the Son, you’ll be lost – with no idea what to make of your life. It’s no surprise if you struggle with inadequacy. If you want to be close to God, to grow in God, to be filled with God, to be complete – then why look to anything or anyone besides Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God.

- ❖ **The second way in which Christ is supreme is that he rules over all creation.** This is what Paul is getting at in v15 when he says that Christ is “*the firstborn of all creation*.” **Now that word “firstborn” has led people, over the centuries, to conclude that the Son is firstborn in terms of birth order.** As if to be “*firstborn of all creation*” means the Son was born first and then everything else in creation was subsequently born or created by his own hands. That was the ancient heresy of Arianism, which is preserved among Jehovah’s Witnesses. They teach that the Son is the first and highest of God’s created beings.
 - The same applies to Christ. **He is the firstborn of all creation in the sense that he rules over all creation as the highest of kings.** And he rules not by virtue of conquest over rivals. He rules by virtue of being sole Creator. The Son has no rivals because you’re never in competition with those you create – those whose very existence depends on you.

- ❖ You see Paul make this argument in v16. Why is the Son the firstborn of all creation? *“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.”* Those thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities would included the evil spiritual forces that the false teacher was warning people about – saying you need to turn to angels or other helps.

- ❖ Paul's point is this – **if Jesus is the highest King, the supreme Lord, if he's the firstborn over all creation, then why look to anyone or anything else?** If all other powers and authorities – visible and invisible, physical and spiritual – are at the mercy of the Son who created them – then clearly he doesn't depend on them to accomplish your salvation. He's a sufficient Savior because he's a supreme Creator and Ruler of all.
- ❖ **Now that relates to the third way in which Christ is supreme – he is the Creator and the point of all creation.** This is what Paul means at the end of v16, "*All things were created through him and for him.*" Paul is describing Christ as both Creator and the overall Point of all creation. All things. All things were made by Jesus, through Jesus, for Jesus.
- ❖ **I read an article about a black hole that astronomers discovered years ago – a black hole that's singing.** Yes, singing. In a galaxy, 250 million light years away, scientists say there's a black hole that has been humming B-flat for billions of years, but at a pitch no human can hear. It's a B-flat that is 57 octaves below middle C of a standard keyboard. This is the deepest note detected in the universe – a tune that we'll never hear.
 - But that's because it wasn't meant for us. **That black hole and that note was made for Jesus.** He's been listening to it, taking joy in it, for God knows how long before any scientist came across it. That's just another reminder that all things were created through him and for him.
- ❖ Keep reading in v17, "*17And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*" **He is not just the Creator of all things in the past. He is the Sustainer of all things in the present.** Christ is presently holding together every single molecule and particle in the universe within himself. It's not just the world in his hands – he's got the entire universe, the whole of creation.
 - So go back to our presenting problem. The false teaching going around was saying Christ is not enough. But does that make any sense in light of these verses? **If Christ is actively sustaining the entire universe from its beginning to its final end, then does it make any sense to doubt his ability to sustain you and your salvation from beginning to end?** Does he really need to be supplemented with anything else?
- ❖ That's why, throughout this letter, Paul is baffled, especially in chapter 2:16, why anyone who has Christ would turn and submit themselves under a system of spirituality full of regulations on what you eat or drink or what festivals you celebrate. **Why would you try to supplement Christ when he's enough. He's sufficient – because he's supreme.** So if you feel inadequate, don't bother looking to yourself or any other power. Look to the only Creator and Sustainer of all creation who makes you adequate through his supreme work of redemption.

The Supremacy of Christ Over the Church

- ❖ That leads us to the second half of this hymn where the focus shifts from creation to redemption. This half is about the supremacy of Christ over the church, which is understood to be a new creation. Again, there are three ways in which Christ's supremacy is exalted that mirror what we saw in the first half. That's a common feature in poetry.

- ❖ **First, let's see how Christ reveals all of God from the Incarnation.** I see this affirmed in v19, "*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.*" Since the Colossians were made to feel as if being united with Christ was not enough, Paul makes a point here in v19 to state that the fullness of God is in Christ. The fullness of God dwells in Jesus.
 - Now that's a huge claim. Because, in **the OT, God dwelt in one and only one place on earth, the temple.** The temple in Jerusalem was the dwelling-place of God. That's where you would travel to meet with God, to experience God.
 - **But ever since the Incarnation – since the Son of God took on flesh – ever since then, God has taken up new residence.** Not a new temple. Not a new city. But a new man. The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was called the Christ. Paul reaffirms this in chapter 2:9 where he says, "*In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.*"

- ❖ **The idea that the fullness of God would be contained within one person – found within one religion – is highly offensive to the world.** Christians are accused of arrogance to claim that our Founder is not just a unique source of knowledge about God – but God himself in the flesh.
 - Moses never would've claimed to be God. Mohammed and Buddha wouldn't have either. **Now they would've claimed to uniquely reveal God – to show the way to God.** Keep these Ten Commandments. Follow these five pillars of faith. Internalize these eight noble truths. Follow the way I took, and you'll see God in the end. That's what a typical religious teacher would claim – to show the way.
 - **But Jesus came on the scene claiming to be the Way** (Jn 14:6). Christianity says the way to God is not a path but a *person*. If you want to see God, then look to the person of Jesus. If you want to find God, then you've got be found in Christ.

- ❖ Notice the harmony of this hymn. In the first half, Jesus reveals the fullness of God from eternity as the preexistent Son. In the second half, he reveals the fullness of God from the incarnation as the incarnate Christ. But there's also this transition in v18 from an emphasis on Jesus being the head or ruler over creation to him being the head or ruler over the church.

- ❖ Here's the second thing we see – in the first half, we saw how Jesus rules over all creation as the firstborn – in the second half, **we see how Jesus rules over all new creation** – over the church – as the firstborn from the dead.
 - Look at v18, "*And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.*" Now when Paul calls Jesus the firstborn from the dead, he's referencing the Resurrection. In this case, Christ is chronologically the first to rise from the dead. **He's the forerunner for all of us who will one day be resurrected unto eternal life.** His resurrection is understood by Paul to be the beginning of a new creation. There are more resurrections to come!

- ❖ **But as we said earlier, the idea of firstborn focuses more on rule and authority than on chronological order.** If you notice, Paul is suggesting that Jesus was resurrected (firstborn from the dead), so that "*in everything he might be preeminent.*" So that means before the Resurrection, he was *not* preeminent in everything.
 - How is that so? **What was Jesus *not* preeminent over prior to his resurrection? It's death.** Ever since death was introduced to the world in Genesis 3, it's been unstoppable. It's been snuffing out dreams and cutting short unfulfilled potential. It's been tearing apart families and stealing away loved ones. It's been holding humanity hostage to fear.

- ❖ In the words of the late Steve Jobs in his famous 2005 Stanford commencement address, "***No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it.***"
 - I wonder how true that statement is for you. If you're a Christian, I assume you want to go to heaven – but are you ready to die? Or are you terrified at the prospect of death? The Bible calls Death an enemy – a universal enemy. It doesn't matter how strong you are, smart you are, or rich you are. All of us will one day die. Jobs was right when he said that death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it.

- ❖ Not even Jesus. Jesus tasted death on the cross when he died in the place of sinners. But death could not hold him. **Jesus didn't escape death. He willingly embraced it and surely defeated it.** Which is why Paul can say that Christ is now preeminent in everything – including death.
 - Paul writes in another letter, in **2 Timothy 1:10**, that Jesus "*abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*" That word for abolish could be translated "to render ineffective". Jesus didn't get rid of death as a concept. Christians don't escape it. Christians continue to taste death – just as our Lord did.

- ❖ **But for Christians – for those who are in Christ – death is defeated.** It's power is broken. Paul says elsewhere that Jesus' death and resurrection has taken the sting out of death (1 Cor 15:55-56). And he identifies the sting as sin. By dying for our sins, Jesus made it possible for his disciples to face a stingless death – a death that has been rendered ineffective.
 - **What was once our enemy has been made a servant – a footstool for Jesus's feet.** And like any good servant, death serves our best interest. Death is gain because we get to be with Christ. So for Christians, there's no reason to fear death. Why would you fear your servant? It works for you and your best interest.

- ❖ And it's all because Christ is now preeminent in everything. That's Paul's point. The Son of God now rules over the old and new creation as the Incarnate, Crucified, but Risen Redeemer. **This leads us to the last thing we see regarding his supremacy over the church – he is the Redeemer and the point of all salvation.**
 - This is what we see in v20, "*and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*" Notice how all of us are found in this verse. **This verse implies that all of us – under the category of "all things" – were once (or still are) *not* at peace with God.**

- ❖ The very need for reconciliation implies that there lies a deep hostility between us and God. **Scripture identifies the source of that hostility to be our rebellious, sinful hearts.** We are rebellious and won't submit to his loving rule, and he is holy and will justly punish us for our rebellion. This is why there's a deep hostility between God and man.
- ❖ That's why we need a Redeemer. Someone who can mediate, who can bring us to the table – to reconcile us, to make peace between God and man. And who better to mediate for us than the One in whom the fullness of God dwells?
 - Jesus is the one Mediator who can equally represent both parties. He identifies with God as much as he does with man. That's what's unique about him. **He is fully God and fully man, all in one person, which makes him a fitting mediator to reconcile man to God.**
- ❖ Notice how v20 says this reconciliation was achieved. He made peace “*by the blood of his cross.*” **To make peace with him, God doesn't ask you to sacrifice.** He doesn't expect any sweat and blood on your part. You don't have to work at it to make peace with God.
 - That's a word for the Colossians who were tempted to adopt ascetic practices. To harshly treat their bodies in an attempt to curb their sinful desires. Hoping that, by a little sweat and blood, they can be complete, adequate, qualified before God.
- ❖ Well, that's a word for us too. **Aren't we often beating ourselves up over sin?** We have these self-made ways of torturing ourselves. Because just saying sorry to God doesn't feel like it's enough. Before God takes us back for the umpteenth time – we feel like we should pay a little bit. We should sweat it out a little bit. Maybe shed a little bit of blood.
 - Christian, stop torturing yourself. Stop beating yourself up. Remember, Jesus experienced all of that so you wouldn't have to. **The Eternal Son of God, the Perfect Son of Man – gave his own sweat and blood to reconcile you to God.** You don't have to supplement his work of salvation. Christ is sufficient. He is adequate. And so are those who hide themselves in him.
- ❖ And if you're not a Christian – if you have yet to place your total trust in Jesus and commit to follow him the rest of your days – today, just know that your Creator, your Sustainer, your God offers peace and forgiveness of sins through the blood of his Son's cross.
 - You receive that promise of peace by praying to him. Saying something like, “*Jesus, I know I have not treated you as supreme, as preeminent. I've been treating myself that way. Please forgive me by the blood the cross. I want to thank you for your sufficiency. I want to live my life now under your supremacy. Amen.*”