

## Gospel Prime – The Preeminence of Christ in Colossians

*Gospel Identity: Raised with Christ (Colossians 3:1-4)*

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on November 17, 2019

### Introduction

- ❖ We've been preaching through the book of Colossians, and we've reached a pivotal point in the letter. As in most of Paul's letters, they begin with a heavy dose of theology, and then at some point, he transitions to giving pastoral counsel. So in the first few chapters, you'll typically read Paul making theological claims. **And in the last few chapters, he issues apostolic commands for the church that are drawn from the theology he's laid out.**
  - So, in our case in Colossians, we've seen in chapters 1 and 2, Paul developing a strong, robust theology of Christ. Jesus is presented as king and champion over the dominion of darkness (1:13; 2:15). **He is exalted as supreme over all things in creation and in redemption.** He is the Head of the church – he is first and preeminent. And that is why Christ is a sufficient Savior in himself. There is no angelic power or spiritual source or system of spirituality that is needed to supplement what a Christian already has in Christ.
    - And now, in chapter 3, Paul starts to draw implications. If Christ is a supreme and sufficient Savior, then what does this mean for your growth as a Christian? What does this mean for your marriage as a Christian? Or for your parenting or your work? What about your witness and engagement with society in general?
- ❖ That's where Paul goes in chapters 3 and 4. **But here, in the first four verses of chapter 3, Paul reminds us what it means to be a Christian.** Before he tells us what a Christian should do, he reminds us what a Christian is. He stresses *being* a Christian before *doing* the works of one.
  - So our passage this morning is on Christian identity. **We're asking: What is a Christian?** How do you know who is a Christian? How can you tell? One of the points Paul is going to stress is that – **you can't just tell by how the person looks or any other human standard.** The Christian person may not appear all that impressive. Maybe they don't look like a saint. So you wouldn't think much of them. They wouldn't stand out.
- ❖ *But all that is gold does not glitter.* That's a line from one of my favorite books. I shared, a while back, that my daughter and I were reading through *The Lord of the Rings*. We finished it earlier this year and have moved on to more of Tolkien's works. But we still love *The Lord of the Rings*, and one of my favorite characters is Aragon, son of Arathorn, the rightful heir to the thrones of Gondor and Arnor. They're two related kingdoms of men in Middle-Earth that have, for centuries, lacked a king on the throne.
  - **But when we first meet Aragon in the book, he's introduced as Strider.** He's dressed in the simple garb of a Ranger. Rangers were skilled fighters who patrolled the countryside, resisting whatever evil crossed their path. The hobbits are initially wearing of trusting him. Strider comes across as dark and brooding. He's very mysterious.
    - But then they're handed a letter from their wizard friend Gandalf, who informs them that he had asked Strider to find the hobbits and to safely guide them to Rivendell. So you can trust him despite appearances. **Then he quotes a poem written about Strider that begins, "All that is gold does not glitter."**

- ❖ Tolkien was playing off of a famous line from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* where it says, "All that glitters is not gold." There it meant that you shouldn't always be impressed by all that is shiny and impressive. But Tolkien flipped the sentence and therefore flipped the meaning.
  - "All that is gold does not glitter" means that Aragon is vastly more impressive than he looks. You're underestimating him if you only look on the outside. It's like how we might say, "Don't judge a book by its cover." **You can't tell a person's true identity just by how they look.**
  
- ❖ That's one of the most important points to make about Christian identity. **We can't tell who is a Christian just by how they look.** Picture with me two guys. The first guy grew up in church. He's still actively involved. He's got a heart for the poor. He can quote you Scripture and can answer your theological questions. **He seems like a really nice guy – and he probably is – but that doesn't make him a Christian.** In this case, we're dealing with a good guy who grew up in a good, wholesome, Christian environment. He has Christian values and exhibits Christian behaviors – but he's not actually a Christian.
  - Now the second guy grew up in a different environment – pretty secular, pretty godless. So for much of his life, he had nothing to do with Christ. He didn't share Christian values or exhibit Christian behaviors. But something happened and now he identifies as a Christian. According to human standards – to how we would typically judge who is a Christian – he doesn't pass. But that's where we have to remember – **a true Christian may not appear all that impressive.** All that is gold does not glitter.
  
- ❖ So let's go to our text, and ask the question, "What is a Christian?" I think we can answer in three different ways. First, a Christian is someone whose life is raised with Christ. Second, someone whose life is hidden with Christ. Third, someone whose life is Christ.

### **Raised with Christ**

- ❖ So, first, a Christian is the person whose life is raised with Christ. That's Paul's answer. Ask someone on the street, and they might say a Christian is a moral person. A church-going person. A religious person. Paul would say a Christian could be those things. **But fundamentally a Christian is a resurrected person.** Read v1 again, "*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*"
  - Now like we said, Paul is about to offer some pastoral counsel. But he's speaking to those he assumes are Christians. He begins with that assumption – if then you're a Christian, then do this. But how exactly did he put it? "*If then you have been raised with Christ.*" **So being raised with Christ is fundamental to being a Christian.**
  
- ❖ Now let's think this through. To be raised with Christ assumes a few truths that Paul already touched on earlier in the letter. It obviously implies that we have somehow already died. **If we were raised (or resurrected), then by implication we must have been in a state of death.**
  - That's what Paul said earlier in chapter 2:13. There he describes all of us as dead – as in dead in our sins. "*You, who were dead in your trespasses.*" This is a death that effects all mankind because we all trace our heritage back to the first man.

- ❖ **Adam is not just our first father. He's our federal head.** If you're not familiar with that theological concept, think about it this way. In our federal government, our federal head would be the president. He's the head of the nation. He represents and speaks for all citizens. And it doesn't matter if you want him to represent you or not. Even if he wasn't your choice – the fact remains that, by virtue of you being an American citizen, the president is your federal head.
  - The same goes for Adam. You could argue, "I didn't choose him to represent me. I want to represent myself!" But the fact remains. **By virtue of you being a human created in the image of God – the first human (Adam) functions as your federal head.** Now what that means theologically is that whatever Adam does extends to you.
  
- ❖ Well what did Adam do? According to Genesis 3, Adam distrusted and disobeyed God. Which resulted in death. And not just physical death. **Genesis 3 describes a spiritual death resulting in spiritual captivity to sin.**
  - Think back to when God placed Adam in the Garden. He warned of what would happen if you ate from that tree. "*For in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.*" (Gen 2:17) But when it finally happened, when Adam ate, he didn't drop dead that day. The Bible says he lived on for 930 years. So was God just kidding about surely dying in that day you eat of the tree? No, a death did occur that day. It was a spiritual death.
  
- ❖ And the point we're making here is that it effected more than just Adam. As our federal head, whatever Adam does extends to us. What he experienced, we experience. **That's why every human since Adam is, by nature, born alive yet born dead.**
  - Our hearts work just fine in terms of beating and pumping blood through our veins. But, by nature, they are cold and dead when it comes to love towards God. Our minds are functioning in terms of processing data and recalling memories. But, by nature, they are ignorant to the glory of Christ and his gospel.
    - In terms of biological life, all of us here are alive and well. **But in terms of spiritual life, there are going to be people here – and people in your life – who are unresponsive as a corpse when it comes to God and the gospel.** That what it means to be spiritually dead – dead in your trespasses.
  
- ❖ That's the first state of death that Paul says we're all under. It's a universal problem. But that's not the end of the story. **There's a different death that actually resolves the problem of this spiritual deadness in all of us.** Paul already made mention of this death as well. Look in chapter 2:20, "*If with Christ you died.*"
  - So chapter 2:13 refers to sharing in the death of the First Adam. That's for all of us because Adam is a federal head for all humanity. **But chapter 2:20 refers to sharing in the death of a Last Adam** (cf. 1 Cor 15:45; Rom 5:15).
    - Christians are those – from among the spiritually dead who share in the death of Adam – but who now, by grace, share in the death of Christ. We have died with Christ. That means his death is counted as your death.

- ❖ **That's what happens when you enter into a federal relationship with Christ.** He becomes your new federal head. That's what it means to be a Christian. You're no longer *in Adam*. You're *in Christ*. So everything Jesus does now extends to you. What he experienced, you experience.
  - **So because he died on the cross, you died on that cross.** The sentence of death that we deserved wasn't just ignored. No, it was carried out. Justice was served – just not on our head – but on our federal head. With Christ, we have died to sin and sin's judgment.
  
- ❖ Friends, all of that is necessary background for us to understand the phrase, "*If then you have been raised with Christ.*" **Fundamental to Christian identity is having died with Christ – in his death – and having been raised with Christ – in his resurrection** (cf. Rom 6:4).
  - But in what sense are we a resurrected people? I don't feel resurrected. If I'm resurrected, then why does my back get sore when I'm on my feet too long? Why do I still have a lingering cough? It doesn't make much sense to say: *I have been raised with Christ.*
    - And Paul goes on to describe where Christ is. He's seated at the right hand of God. This seems to imply that Christians, as well, have been raised and seated with Christ at the right hand of God (cf. Eph 2:6). But we're sitting in pews right now in church. This doesn't make much sense.
  
- ❖ **Now if the verb was in the future tense, it would make perfect sense.** If v1 said, "If then you *will one day* be raised with Christ and seated with him at the right hand of God," it's not surprising. All Christians hope for a future bodily resurrection – to be resurrected in glory.
  - But the amazing thing is that Paul speaks in the past tense. You have been raised. How are we to understand this? **Is Paul speaking figuratively? No, he's speaking federally.** You may not be physically seated at God's right hand, but don't conclude that this is just a metaphor. That this language is not describing something real.
    - **You may not be there physically at the right hand of God, but you are there federally. And that's real.** You really are there seated at the right hand of God – because Christ is really there.
  
- ❖ So meditate with me on what this means: If you have been raised with Christ – if you're truly seated with him, right now, at the right hand of God – **then that means you are fully welcomed and accepted by God right now as you are.** The right hand is the highest seat of honor, and that's where you're seated by virtue of your union with Christ, your federal head.
  - **Christian, do you realize everything that is true of Christ is true of you?** Just as Jesus is honored in the eyes of God, you are honored. Just as Jesus loved by his Father, you are loved. Can you comprehend that? **The Father loves you exactly as he loves His Son!**
  
- ❖ I know you may not feel that way. You may not look that way. But all that is gold does not glitter. **If you are raised with Christ, you are vastly more valuable than you appear.** Our problem is that we're too accustomed to seeking things on the earth – to focusing on human standards and making human judgments. We need to seek the things that are above and to start looking at everything else from a heavenly perspective.

## Hidden with Christ

- ❖ But, friends, don't be surprised if your resurrected life doesn't seem to glitter right now. Paul said as much in our text. This leads to our second point. What is a Christian? **A Christian is someone whose life is hidden with Christ.** Look at vv2-3, *"<sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup>For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."*
- ❖ Now this idea of having your life hidden with Christ in God could be interpreted and applied in one of two ways. And they're not mutually exclusive. They could both be true. **The first way of understanding your life being hidden with Christ is in terms of shelter and protection.**
  - It's like how David sang of God's divine protection in Psalm 27:5, *"For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock."* Biblical salvation is often depicted this way. To be saved is to be hidden in God. He serves as a shelter for us.
- ❖ So if you're not hidden with Christ in God – if Adam is still your (federal) head – then just like Adam, you're going to try to hide your shame relying on self-made concealments. Turning to fig-leaves of human effort. The point Paul was making in last week's passage is how self-made religion can't deal adequately with your sin and shame. You're still exposed.
  - **The question God posed to Adam in the Garden is the question he poses to you: Where are you? Where are you hiding?** Who or what are you turning to for protection?
    - Friends, the only safe shelter in the day of trouble – the only refuge from the storm of God's judgment against sin – is in Christ. That's one comforting interpretation of what it means for your life to be hidden with Christ in God.
- ❖ But there's another sense in which our lives are hidden with Christ, and I think this interpretation fits the context even better. The only other place in the letter where Paul uses the term *"hidden"* is found in chapter 1:26. That's where he was describing the gospel as a *"mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints."*
  - Paul was saying the gospel was once hazy and hidden for ages, but now it's been revealed with the coming of Christ – in the same way, our true identities in Christ are hidden right now to the eyes of the world. **Every single Christian looks unimpressive compared to who they actually are raised with Christ.** Even the godliest believer you know – who is selfless and sacrificial, with a pure heart and generous spirit – even that person looks more like coal than the diamond he or she is in Christ.
- ❖ **Paul is saying that our true identities are presently hidden (imperceptible to the world) until the appearing of Christ.** As v4 says, *"When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."* We'll be revealed as true sons and daughters of God. Listen to **1 John 3:2**, *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."*
  - That reminds me of something C.S. Lewis said in his famous address called *The Weight of Glory*. He says if you saw a Christian in fullness of his or her glory, you would be tempted to worship the person.

- Listen to these words, *“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.”*
- ❖ Lewis also wrote a book called *The Great Divorce*. It's a parable in which the narrator goes to heaven with a guide showing him around. There's this moment where he sees this parade of bright Spirits dancing and singing all in honor of one lady who shines brighter than the rest.
  - The narrator is blown away by her beauty and glory. He turns to his guide and whispers, *“Is it? . . . is it?”* He's trying to name some famous historical figure or celebrity long dead. But the guide quickly interrupts. *“Not at all, it's someone you'll never have heard of. Her name on Earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green.”*
    - This confuses the narrator, *“But she seems to be . . . well, a person of particular importance?”* *“Aye,”* answers the guide, *“She is one of the great ones. Have you not heard that fame in this country and fame on Earth are two quite different things?”*
- ❖ Like we said earlier, you can't tell a person's true identity just by how they look. **Because all that is gold does not glitter, you can't go by looks and behavior alone.** The most unassuming person out there – who doesn't look like much and hasn't accomplished much; who will never be in the spotlight; who will never be famous (not even Christian famous) – that person may have died with Christ and has been raised with Christ.
  - Right now, their life is hidden with Christ in God. You can't see it. But their true life (identity) is part of that mystery to be revealed in fullness at the second coming of Christ. If you could see their true identity now – you would be strongly tempted to worship.
- ❖ **And let's face it, that unassuming, unimpressive person is really us.** It's you. It's me. We're all familiar with feelings of discouragement and disappointment. Life didn't go exactly as we had planned in our early twenties. We didn't achieve all our ambitions. We didn't meet all our goals. And our experience of the Christian life was never as bold or transformative as we expected. We're struggling with the same sins; bearing the same baggage; dealing with the same issues.
  - Brothers and sisters, we've got to live by faith and not by sight. By faith, trust Paul when he says your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

### Your Life is Christ

- ❖ Let's conclude by looking at v4 a bit more carefully, specifically where it says, *“Christ who is your life.”* This is our third point. What is a Christian? **A Christian is someone whose life is Christ.** For Christ to be your life is the most defining characteristic of a Christian.
  - The essence of what it means to be a Christian is not that I am someone trying to be like Christ; or someone trying to obey Christ; or someone trying to love Christ. **Though all those things are true and necessary – the essence of what it means to be a Christian is that Christ is my life.**

- ❖ That's what Paul is trying to get at in v2 where he says to, "*Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*" **To set your mind on something is essentially to make that thing your life.** To you set your mind on earthly things – on a person, on a possession, or a pursuit or passion – is to make that thing your life.
  - Students set their minds on academic achievement and it becomes their life. Professionals set their minds on career advancement and it becomes their life. Lovers set their minds on each other and they become each other's life. That's how it works.
  
- ❖ Now how do you know what you've set your mind on? How do you know what has become your life? Just ask yourself: **What passions, what pursuits, what possessions, what people – what things in your life, if you were to lose them, if they were taken away – would make you feel like you don't have a life left?** If losing that thing or having that thing fail you or disappoint you – if that would make you feel like life has lost its point – then it's clear this thing is your life. You've set your mind on it – to such an extent – that it's become your life.
  - **Here's the problem: You're going to find yourself in a never-ending cycle of pride or despair – depending on whether you've achieved what you've set your mind on.** If you get what you're chasing, if you make it to the top, then you feel pride in yourself. But if you fail to obtain it or you lose it or it turns out to be woefully unsatisfying, then you feel a sense of despair.
  
- ❖ **Friends, the only way to handle the success and failures of life – without resulting in either pride or despair – the only way is to make Christ your life.** When you set your mind on Christ – when he's not just your ticket to heaven; when he's not just your answer to a guilty conscience; when he's more than just an inspiration and example – when Jesus is your life, then you're free. **You're free to experience success or failure without it inflating you or crushing you.**
  - You can look at the things of the earth – you can look at that object or that person or that dream that you might lose – and you can say, "**You're not my life. Christ is my life.** You're a good thing, and I'd be grateful to have you in my life. But if I never have you or if I do but eventually lose you, my life won't be over – my life will go on and will one day appear in glory. Because Christ is my life."
    - **Galatians 2:20**, "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*"