

Gospel Prime – The Preeminence of Christ in Colossians

The Gospel for Outsiders (Colossians 4:2-18)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on December 15, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we've come to the close of our sermon series through the book of Colossians. We've been calling it "Gospel Prime" because whatever is prime is considered "of first importance". It's preeminent. It takes first place. **And that's been the emphasis of Colossians – the gospel, namely the person and work of Christ Jesus, is of prime importance.** And that preeminence we assign to Christ should be made manifest in the life and priorities of the church. In other words, it should be so clear to those outside the church that the gospel is as precious and valuable to us as the air we breathe. Without it, we would be dead and without hope.
 - **As I've said before, the gospel – preached and live out in all its truth, goodness, and beauty – ought to be the honey and glue of the church.** It's what we should depend on to attract people to come to our church. And it's what we should depend on to bind people together in community. We're too prone these days to rely on natural affinities and special interests to be our honey and glue.

- ❖ In their book, *The Compelling Community*, Jamie Dunlop and Mark Dever make the case that the attractional church paradigm fails to recognize and release the power of the gospel in a church's life together.¹ While not denying the truths of the gospel, attractional churches minimize the power of the gospel to attract and unite a disparate people into one body.
 - **Maybe you've never heard the term "attractional church", but I think you're familiar with the attractional mindset.** In churches that have this mindset, it's not so clear that the gospel is prime. The gospel is still there and it's still important. But for one church partisan politics is prime. While for another, a particular program or curriculum is prime. For another, an upper-middle-class, family-centric lifestyle is prime. And in another, this or that theological distinctive or social agenda is prime. **Whatever the case, it means that that church is relying – not just on the gospel – but on the gospel-plus this or that emphasis to attract people and bind people like honey and glue.**

- ❖ Now let's be clear. **We should commend any church that holds to the gospel and desires to attract people.** It's good and right for a church to want to give off a compelling witness to the world. **But what are we ultimately relying on for that compelling witness?**
 - We've got to be careful *not* to adopt the mindset that minimizes the power of the gospel to attract and bind people like honey and glue. I'm all for attractive churches. I want HCC to be one. But not because of any improvement or extension to our building. Not because of any particular program or event we offer. Not because of any natural affinity or special interest we share. **I'm only interested in gospel attraction** – where the preaching of our church and the lives of our people are distinctly shaped by the gospel.

- ❖ That's what Paul's letter to the Colossians has been all about. He spent the first two chapters laying out the gospel. And the last two chapters applying the gospel, threading it between all the relationships found in a church. **All the relationships between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, husband and wife, parent and child – are all transformed and tied together by the gospel.**

¹Jamie Dunlop & Mark Dever, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

- ❖ For those who aren't clear on what is the gospel, the gospel, according to Colossians, says that everyone is a sinner in need of redemption and forgiveness (1:14). That's our identity in the flesh. **But through his blood shed on the cross, Jesus made peace and reconciliation between God and man** (1:20). He triumphed over sin, death, and the devil at the cross (2:15). And now by grace through faith, sinners are transformed and given new identities hidden in Christ (3:3). By grace through faith, we are delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his Beloved Son (1:13).
- ❖ That's the gospel that Paul has been making prime throughout his letter. **And now he concludes by exhorting the church to maintain a clear and compelling gospel witness to the outside world.** He wants churches to be attractive in the right ways. That means adopting the following three practices: (1) Make a practice of talking to God about people. (2) Make a practice of talking to people about God. (3) Make a practice of reaching people with people.

Talking to God About People

- ❖ Let's consider the first practice to adopt. **Make a practice of talking to God about people.** This is about prayer. We see this emphasized in v2, "*Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.*" There's the idea of persistence here. Of being devoted in prayer. Of persevering in it. That word for "*continue steadfastly*" is used again by Paul in Romans 12:12 where he says to "*be constant in prayer.*"
 - Which, interestingly enough, he uses it again in Romans a few verses later in chapter 13:6 when he describes how governing authorities are constant and steadfast in attending to the collection of taxes. **So just as they say that the only constants in life are death and taxes – for the Christian, we would add prayer to that list.** Prayer should be a constant in the Christian life.
 - And that's the example set by the early church. In Acts 1:14, we read that the first Christians were "*with one accord devoting themselves to prayer.*" That's the same Greek word. With one accord they *continued steadfastly* in prayer.
- ❖ Now that sounds beautiful and inspiring – but what does that actually look like? How constant is constant? How steadfast should steadfast prayers be? Are we talking about every hour? Five times a day? Every time we sit down for a meal? At least once in the morning or before we go to bed? We want to know what the expectation is in measurable, quantifiable terms.
 - **But when Paul exhorts us to continued, ceaseless prayer, he's focusing not so much on a constant speaking of words but on a consistent posture of heart.** It's about a continual, ceaseless posture of prayer in the presence of God.
- ❖ There's a book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. It's a collection of teachings by a 17th-century monk known as **Brother Lawrence**. He lived in a French monastery where he served in the kitchen as a simple cook. But because of his exemplary devotional life, travelers would seek him out for counsel. **The main idea of the book is about developing a discipline of living constantly and consciously in the presence of God.**

- ❖ Brother Lawrence would say if you want to practice the presence of God, then you've got to erase those unhelpful ways in which we divide up our schedule. Our days are too fragmented into work time, personal time, family time, and then prayer time – which is usually just a tiny fraction of the whole, if at all. **But Brother Lawrence's secret was simple – he treated his day as an integrated whole lived out in a posture of prayer.**
 - He writes, *“The time of business does not differ with me from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were on my knees.”*
 - One observer noted how Brother Lawrence believed, *“it was a serious mistake to think of our prayer time as being different from any other. Our actions should unite us with God when we are involved in our daily activities, just as our prayers unite us with Him in our quiet devotions. . . . When he wasn't in prayer, he felt practically the same way.”*²

- ❖ Paul made a similar point earlier. When he addressed Christian slaves and masters in the prior passage, he was reminding them not to serve *“by way of eye-service”*. That is, don't just do good work when the boss is watching. Why? Because we know the Lord God, our true Boss, is always watching. **Our work life ought to be shaped by the reality that we're always under the eyes of God. The same goes for our prayer life.**
 - Being continually steadfast in prayer doesn't mean constantly mumbling prayers under your breath. **But it does mean a consistent posture of the heart where you're constantly and consciously living under the eyes of God.**

- ❖ Now look back at v2. We're told to continue steadfastly in prayer, *“being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”* So we're to be praying steadfastly and watchfully. **This idea of being watchful means to be alert, vigilant, always ready to spring into prayer.** Paul says something similar in Ephesians 6 when describing our spiritual armor. He says the two offensive weapons you can depend on when engaging in spiritual warfare is the sword of the Spirit (which is the Word of God) and prayer. He says to pray, *“at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.”*
 - Keep alert. Be watchful. Any time you feel the slightest urge to pray, give in to it. Don't resist. **Martyn Lloyd-Jones** counsels us to, *“Always respond to every impulse to pray...always obey such an impulse.”*³ Why? Because you know that urge is from the Spirit. It'll never come from Satan. He doesn't want you praying. But the Spirit does. So no matter what you're doing. No matter how inconvenient. **Never resist the impulse to pray.** And of course, if you're on the freeway, prayer can be done with eyes open and done quickly and quietly in the heart.

- ❖ **So we're to continue in prayer steadfastly, watchfully – and thankfully.** *“Being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”* I think the key here is to be mindful to include in your prayer life a

²Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1982), pg. 24-25.

³D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), pg. 182.

remembrance of answered prayer. We're so quick to bring to God new supplications. But at the same time, so quick to forget how he has mercifully answered prior requests. **Make a practice – of not just supplicating God – but of thanking him for his faithfulness in your prayer life.**

- ❖ Now so far in v2, we've seen the command for prayer. In v3, we're going to see the content of prayer. What are we to be praying for? **Paul says to pray for opportunities in gospel proclamation.** *“³At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison.”*
 - He's asking the Colossians to be steadfast in praying for him, specifically for opportunities to share the gospel. Or as he puts it, *“to declare the mystery of Christ”*. That's language he used back in chapters 1 and 2. There we saw how it was referring to the inclusion of Gentiles into the redeemed community of God. It was part of God's plan from the beginning, but as to how that going to happen was a mystery in the OT. But now the hope of glory is a hope available for Jews and Gentiles through faith in the gospel.
- ❖ This idea of God opening a door for the gospel is used by Paul elsewhere in the NT (cf. Acts 14:27; 1 Cor 16:9). **And based on how he uses it, this picture of God opening a door is not just about opportunities to evangelize but about effectiveness in our evangelism.** This prayer for God to open doors is a recognition of his sovereignty over salvation and how prayer is the most effective component of our evangelism. We often treat it as a formality or courtesy to God. But covering our evangelism with prayer is the most important step because no one gets saved because of the logic of our arguments or the eloquence of our words. **People only get saved when the Lord opens up a door for the gospel to penetrate a dead heart of stone transforming it into a beating heart of faith.**
- ❖ There's this story that **Hudson Taylor** told. As many know, he was a 19th-century missionary to China who founded the China Inland Mission. He tells about a mission station that was particularly blessed in its effectiveness, far above others. And there wasn't a discernible explanation since the other stations and their missionaries were equally devoted and capable.
 - One time, Taylor was traveling in England, and after a meeting, a man approached him asking about that mission station. He was asking about the missionary stationed there. It turns out that he was the missionary's former college roommate, and for years he had committed himself to praying every day for the missionary and his gospel work. Hudson Taylor said, *“Then I knew the answer.”*⁴ **Then he knew where the effectiveness came from – it came from the continual, steadfast, watchful prayer of the saints.**
- ❖ Church, let's make a practice of talking to God about people. **Praying for more opportunities to share the gospel and for more courage to step through those doors when God opens them.** That's one of the big emphases in our upcoming New Year's Day prayer services. We're putting on two identical, bilingual prayer services – one early morning and one late afternoon on

⁴ Kent Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1989), pg. 138.

New Years. We're going to be praying for our gospel witness and outreach. We hope all of you can join us that day as we pray for God to open to us a door for the gospel.

Talking to People About God

- ❖ So prayer – talking to God about people – is one of the practices to prioritize as a church. Well, it goes hand in hand with **talking to people about God**. That's the second practice to adopt. This has to do with evangelism itself.

- ❖ **In v4, Paul says, besides opportunities in gospel proclamation, another thing I want you to pray for is clarity in gospel proclamation.** Look at v4, "*that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.*" So when it comes to talking to people about God, Paul acknowledges an obligation to not only speak the gospel but to do so clearly. To take the mystery of Christ in the gospel and to clarify it and explain it in ways that even a child can understand.
 - **This is the preacher's challenge – to preach the Word not just accurately but clearly.** Having sound theology and exegetical skills is essential. But if you don't know how to clearly proclaim it – if you can't explain the biblical truth in the vernacular, in common speech – then C.S. Lewis would say you either don't understand it or you don't believe it.⁵

- ❖ I'm all for studying theology and pursuing advanced theological degrees. **But if all your learning doesn't translate into common speech that's comprehensible to the common man, then it's pointless.** All that learning will just puff you up. Charles Spurgeon once commented on the state of the pulpit in his day, "*Christ said, 'Feed my sheep ... Feed My lambs.' Some preachers, however, put the food so high that neither sheep nor lambs can reach it. They seem to have read the text, 'Feed my giraffes.'*"⁶
 - Now Paul's exhortation to speak clearly is not just about avoiding highly technical terms or theological jargon in your preaching or teaching. **Clarity is about how you package it all.** If a sermon doesn't have a clear overriding idea – if the preacher doesn't know where he's going with it – then no one is edified. **As they say, a mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew. Our job is to preach laser sermons with a definite point.** Not floodlight sermons that shine a lot of light everywhere but can't cut to the heart like a laser can.

- ❖ But it's not just preachers who need clarity. **Every Christian who opens up his or her mouth to explain the Word or proclaim the gospel needs to know how to make it clear.** You might know the gospel. But do you know how to share it? And when you share, does it come across like a floodlight? Shining light everywhere but landing nowhere? Or is your gospel sharing like a laser that God can use to cut people to the heart and make an open door for the Word?
 - If you need help in clarity, then I'm going to point you to Minister Henry and Alison Woo, our deaconess over English Outreach. They're ready to resource you, and they'll occasionally organize seminars that will equip you to share the gospel with greater conviction and clarity.

⁵ Quoted in Michael Aeschliman, *The Restitution of Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), pg. 5.

⁶ Quoted in John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), pg. 128.

- ❖ So as we talk to people about God, we need to speak with clarity. **We also need to walk in wisdom.** Look at v5, "*Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.*" This is all about being wise with your words and actions, with your judgment and decisions – **being careful to guard your gospel witness.** Don't let your speech or conduct become a stumbling block for those outside the kingdom of Christ.
 - We've got to be wise with the way we carry ourselves and conduct ourselves in the public square, in our workplace, in our campus, in our commute. It's true that the gospel frees us from excessive concern over our reputation – over how people view us. Once we're secure in our identity in Christ, we are liberated from the fear of man. Praise God!

- ❖ But that doesn't mean we should just ignore our reputation and care less about how people view us. **No, we still have to be wise in maintaining a respectable reputation because – even though we're no longer representing ourselves – we *are* representing Christ and his gospel.** Outsiders will look at your life and doctrine to determine whether there's a compelling reason to follow you in following Christ.
 - **That's why you've got to be in a gospel community where you have brothers and sisters in Christ who are bold and loving enough to kindly admonish you with the Word when you're not walking wisely.** It's out of concern for your witness and for the name of Christ that you bear. If you don't have anyone in your life right now able to do that for you – to kindly admonish you to walk in wisdom – then it probably means you're too detached from gospel community and you need to dig in deeper.

- ❖ Paul goes on to tell us to walk in wisdom toward outsiders, "*making the best use of the time.*" Literally, he says to buy up the time. Or to redeem the time. **It means to make the most out of your time – to make the best use of it.** For what? For evangelism. For reaching outsiders.
 - How are you using your time? Everyone's busy. No one has the excuse of not having enough time for evangelism. No one has ever had enough time. And don't try to argue that you're in a busy season of life and need to focus on your work or studies. There's never been a convenient season to share the gospel. But Paul says we've got to be ready, in season or out, to preach the word (2 Tim 4:2).

- ❖ I love hearing stories from you all. **About how some of you are making the best use of the ordinary, mundane times in your day to look for open doors to reach out to those outside of Christ.** You're making the best use of those brief minutes during drop off or pick up time at your kid's school to get to know other parents. You're making the best use of your lunch breaks to spend time with unbelieving colleagues. You're making the best use of those regular routines and errands in your day – purposely frequenting the same local stores and coffee shops trying to build friendships with the workers or other patrons. And if you have yet to make a practice of that, there's no better time to start than now.

- ❖ Now in v6, Paul addresses the manner in which we speak to people about God. *“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”* Gracious speech is referring to attractive speech, compelling speech. That’s what it means to have your speech *“seasoned with salt”*.
 - I realize for younger generations, for your speech to be “salty” has an entirely different connotation. It’s more about saying something rude or biting. So it’s important to recover the biblical form of salty speech. **Salt, in ancient times, served as a preservative against rot and corruption and added flavor and taste to bland meals.**
 - So words seasoned with salt refer to words that draw people – words that won’t corrupt or rot – but rather words that build up and feed others. If that’s going to happen, then our speech must be saturated with gospel truth. So that we know how we ought to answer people when they ask about the faith.

- ❖ Peter says something similar in his first epistle. **1 Peter 3:15** says, *“but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”*
 - Friends, are you prepared to answer others? To explain the reason for the gospel hope in you? And can you share your faith graciously, winsomely, with gentleness and respect? If you’re not sure if you can, then I recommend a resource called ***Christianity Explained***. It’s a workbook – not so much for you to walk through with a non-believer – but for you to read yourself and internalize. It’ll equip you on how to read through the Gospel of Mark with someone, and at the same time highlighting the basic truths of the gospel as you go through the book. You can pick up a copy in our bookstall after service.

Reaching People with People

- ❖ So we’ve been talking about how to become a compelling, attractive church in the right way – the gospel way – and we’ve said to adopt the practices of talking to God about people and talking to people about God. **Lastly, Paul exhorts us in vv7-18 to reach people with people.** That means relying – not on solo efforts of evangelism – but on our church community to reach people with people.
 - That’s one of the most notable aspects of the closing sections of Paul’s letters. It’s filled with a bunch of greetings to people that you’ve mostly never heard of. **And it goes to show how dependent Paul was on others to complete his mission.** This is the mighty Apostle Paul – who planted dozens of churches and wrote practically half of the books in the NT – and yet behind every Paul is a host of faithful servants you’ve never heard of. We don’t have the time to go into each verse and the backstory of each person mentioned, so I’ll just highlight three observations from this final greetings section of the letter.

- ❖ **First, recognize that reaching people for the gospel will call for some people to serve out of the spotlight.** Tychicus is a good example in v7. Many of you have never heard of him, even though Paul mentions him in four of his letters (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7; 2 Tim 4:12; Tit 3:12).
 - Based on those references, we learn that he was the letter carrier for Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon. That was his role. He was the mailman. And yet for Paul to call

him a “*faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord*” – affirms that, in the economy of God, the man who delivered Colossians is just as important as the man who wrote it. What use would there be in Paul writing a letter if it never got delivered?

- Maybe you heard the proverb: “*For want of a nail the shoe was lost; For want of a shoe the horse was lost; For want of a horse the battle was lost; For the failure of battle the kingdom was lost – All for the want of a horse-shoe nail.*” **The point is – every role in the economy of God counts, even the seemingly ordinary.**
 - Everyone wants to be a Paul and to make a Paul-like difference in the kingdom. But the reality is that all of us are more like Tychicus. And we’ll make a Tychicus-like difference. But that difference is just as important for the cause of Christ.

- ❖ **Second, recognize that reaching people for the gospel will involve some people we would’ve least expected.** Just consider Onesimus in v9. He’s the runaway slave that the book of Philemon is all about. Now when he’s introduced to us in the NT, he’s been converted. He’s a believer, a beloved brother in Christ. But don’t forget that he was a runaway slave. He would’ve been viewed as a criminal, a law breaker, on the run. No one would’ve expected a guy like Onesimus could be useful for the cause of Christ. But that’s what the name Onesimus means. It means useful. And considering his own past, Paul would’ve been the first to say your past doesn’t have to define your future and your usefulness to God – because of the grace of God in the gospel.
- ❖ **Third, recognize that reaching people for the gospel will include some people who have failed miserably.** Mark is an example in v10. This is likely the Mark who deserted Paul and Barnabas during their first missionary journey (Acts 15:39). He failed miserably. He let down the team. That’s why Paul was hesitant to rely on Mark on the next journey. It led to a falling out between Paul and Barnabas.
 - But apparently by the time Paul was writing to the Colossians, there had been a reconciliation and a restoration of Mark to gospel ministry. In fact, in what was likely Paul’s last letter, in 2 Timothy 4:11 he asks for Timothy to bring Mark to visit him in prison because “*he is very useful to me for ministry.*” That’s a beautiful witness to the transforming power of the gospel.
- ❖ **Friends, I know it’s tempting to breeze over the last few verses in Paul’s letters because they all seem to end with seemingly random greetings to people we don’t know.** But this is what sticks out to me, especially in letters like this where he’s writing from prison (4:3,18).
 - Here we have a man in chains, unjustly imprisoned. If anyone has an excuse to be thinking about himself – if anyone had a reason to be self-absorbed – it would be Paul. And yet here he is taking the time as the end of this letter to greet those who have shared in his suffering and in his labor for the cause of Christ. **The point is that Paul is a man who loves and values his friendships.** May the Lord do the same in our hearts – helping us prioritize and value the friends and fellow servants in our lives that are committed to the cause of Christ.