

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians Introduction - Colossians 1:18

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

We are going to begin with a brief exercise this morning. I am going to describe a situation and I would like to consider the first thing that comes to your mind. Keep it to yourself. None of us need to hear it, just what comes to mind when you consider the following circumstances:

1. The phone rings and awakens you at 2:30 in the morning. What comes to your mind?
2. You come home from a long day out and find your house has been broken into.
3. You get a letter in the mail – its from the IRS
4. You look into the mirror in the morning and take a long hard look at yourself
5. You get a memo from the boss stating that he wants to see you immediately (or children, your father says he wants to talk to you now).
6. You're taking an evening walk or bike ride when you hear the loud boom of a car backfire just behind you
7. You are driving down the highway when a crazy drive pulls in front of you causing you to quickly slow down
8. For the kids – a friend or a brother or sister comes up and takes something out of your hands.
9. You're watching a loved one join hands with his or her soon to be spouse at a wedding
10. You see that newborn baby for the first time
11. You're gathered with family and friends looking upon the casket of a loved one.
12. You wake up trying to remember what day of the week it is and realize its Sunday.
13. You hear the news announce that the Democratic party now holds a filibuster proof 60 seat majority in the Senate.

We could go on all day with scenes like this and each one might solicit a different response or emotion. Sometimes you might be fearful. Sometimes you might feel violated. Sometimes your response would be of anger, other times of sadness. And of course we all love those times of happiness and joy. Life is filled with events, some of which cause great anticipation, excitement or anxiety while others might cause you to be calm and relaxed.

I had you engage in this little exercise not to evaluate emotions, but to point out something that might have happened that you were not even aware of. That in the everyday events of life, it is easy to quickly consider our own emotions and responses while being slow or even forgetful that behind it all and above it all is a sovereign and loving Lord who has planned it all and promises to protect and guide us through it all – and here is the key – all for His glory; all for His honor; all to point to His supremacy and His preeminence in our lives. For the believer in Jesus Christ; for the one who has professed to trust Jesus for life and salvation, we can and must see that Jesus comes to have first place in everything – in our thinking, in our actions, and even in our responses to everyday things. And it is this idea, that Jesus is to come to have first place in everything in our lives that serves as the very theme of our new study in the book of Colossians

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as Paul wrote at the end 1:18, **“so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.”**

Let me tell you a little bit about the church to which Paul wrote. How Paul addresses as well as why Paul addresses this them of Christ coming to have first place in everything. First, let me remind you that the people to whom Paul first wrote this letter are people, just like you and me. Just like each of us, they experienced their own set of pressures and had their concerns. Just like us they were surrounded by a culture that embraced a multitude of religious ideas. In Colosse were Jews, most of whom did not practice the Judaism of Old Testament Israel, but rather what was called folk Judaism, which was essentially a mixture of Judaism with all the other religions around it. Also in Colosse were Gentiles, most of whom practiced pagan religions of various sorts. What was common to all the religions of Colosse was superstition as well as the believe and worship of multiple gods or spirits. For the people of Colosse, all gods, whether good or bad, were to be paid tribute, for neglecting a good spirit might result in experiencing his wrath and of course scoffing a bad spirit, well that would just be bad.

Colosse itself was a rather small and insignificant city in the middle of what is now Turkey, Asia Minor (show map). The much larger and more financially prosperous Laodicea lay just over 10 miles to the north, a city that would be condemned by Jesus Christ in the third chapter of Revelation because they would say of themselves, **“I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing...”** To this Jesus says, **“and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.”** It is to Laodicea that Jesus also said, **“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16).** I mention this about Laodicea because Paul does address them as well in this letter. But while Colosse was smaller and quieter, it did have one redeeming value. It was on a trade route between the great city of Ephesus on the west coast and the port city of Perga to the south. I picture it in my mind like the little town of Shamrock Texas that lies about halfway between Oklahoma City, OK and Amarillo, TX. Its got a few gas stations, a few hotels and a few diners, but that’s about it. But beyond this, it is interesting to note that Colosse was the least important city of any to which Paul wrote a letter. And in this there is a great truth to be remembered. That there is no place in which the Church of Jesus Christ exists that is not remembered and cared for by the providence of God as the Holy Spirit directs the Apostle Paul to both encourage them in the faith and warn them of dangerous teaching.

Let me also point out to you that the church of Colosse was not founded by Paul. When Paul wrote this letter, he was under house arrest in Rome. It was about 60 or 61 AD. During Paul’s third missionary journey, Paul stayed for about two years in the important city of Ephesus, just some 100 miles west of Colosse. It is believed that Paul never visited or traveled through Colosse, having always come in from the north through Laodicea. So, how did Paul know about the church at Colosse? Why was it important to Him? Well, for the two years that Paul spent in Ephesus, Acts 19:10 tells us that because of the preaching of Paul, **“all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord.”** One of those who came to hear was a man by the name of Epaphras, who was mostly likely converted in Ephesus and then took the gospel to Colosse, preached it and thus started the there. Over the course of time, Epaphras, wanting to give a report and perhaps seek more teaching in light of some of the problems they were having, sought Paul out in Rome (Colossians 1:7). In addition to all this, a run away slave by the name of Onesimus, heard Paul in

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Rome and was converted to Christ. Onesimus was from Colosse and his master's name was Philemon, a leader in the church at Colosse and the same Philemon that Paul wrote the letter to as contained in our New Testament.

Sometimes I marvel at what I call the smallness of the community of faith. It is not unusual for me to run into a believer that I do not know, but upon conversing, he will know some one that I do know. God often uses His people like this to bring encouragement. And we have no idea of how what we might say to one believer could be used to impact the lives of other believers. Of course we are a highly mobile society and here we have Paul, who having taught this runaway slave Onesimus the way of Christ, is sending him back with a man by the name of Tychicus with not only this letter for the church at Colosse, but also a letter for the church at Ephesus and possibly even the letter to Philemon. The providence of God to bring Onesimus to Rome to hear Paul and then to send him back to be received not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Truly Christ had first place in these men's lives.

And so, let me come back to our opening exercise and point out to you how it relates to our study of the book of Colossians. As I have said, the Colossians were a highly religious and superstitious people, so wrapped up with how things around, usually identified with either good or evil spirits, were affecting them. They were thinking about themselves. How to protect themselves. How to live for themselves. How to save themselves. This was the general concern of the people of that area. And so, in order to so deal with these issues, they would worship whatever god or spirit they thought would most aptly provide them protection. This mentality and tendency was what most of the people in the church at Colosse were saved from. However, it appears that a teacher came into the church, reminding the believers in this church of their past methods of worship, perhaps swaying them to think that some of the difficulties they were having in their lives were because they had stopped worshipping the spirits. This teacher was also telling them they had to obey certain rules or practices to be right with these spirits, things like fasting, and abstaining from certain activities. And finally, this teacher was telling them that he somehow had a special knowledge or insight that others did not have, basically calling into question the authority of the apostles' teaching that they had received from Epaphras. And here is the point, this teacher or these teachers were teaching that the believer's union or relationship to Jesus was not enough and so they added to the true doctrine of Christ all these other false ideas.

And beloved, it is just as easy for us to do this today as it was for them. When things don't go our way, we may first and rather worry than to trust Jesus first. When we are afraid or scared, we may look to others before we look to Jesus. And even when things are going well, we may even at times more quickly forget to place Jesus first, giving Him thanks for all his blessings. The truth is, it is our tendency is to put ourselves first; to think about ourselves first. To look out for number one. The book of Colossians addresses such issues and answer the question, "*How does Christ come to have first place in everything in our lives?*"

For the rest of our time this morning, let me quickly walk you through the book of Colossians and show you how Christ can come to have first place in our lives. I see four general areas addressed in which we are instructed. In order for Christ to come to have first place in everything, we must first learn...

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I. **The Preeminence of Christ (1:1-20)**

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything (1:18).

Again, verse 18 states it so well, that Jesus is to come to have first place in everything. Jesus is to have preeminence, first place, honor, glory, prestige and acknowledgement in every area of our life. Knowing Jesus and His ways is to be our prime priority. His supremacy over all things as well as in all things is to be understood and practiced. But just how do we see the preeminence of Christ illustrated in this first chapter? Let me offer you three such ways.

The Substance of our Faith (1:1-8)

We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel

Jesus is the substance of our faith. Jesus will always be the essence of our faith. In Hebrews 12:2 He is called the “author and perfecter of faith”. He is the origin and the end of faith; the beginning and conclusion; the Alpha and the Omega. There is no true faith that does not start with Christ, continue with Christ and finishes with Christ. Nothing else is needed; no one else can contribute anything. As the hymn writer says in the first verse of “The Solid Rock.”

If you do not have faith in Jesus Christ, then He does not have first place in your life. If your faith is weak or has grown cold, you are looking to other things or people to find meaning or happiness or hope, then Jesus does not have first place in everything in your life. (all the friends you have on Facebook; how many things you have in your house; that others see you as being a manly man or if you are a woman, the essence of femininity.) He is to be your priority. He is to be your life. He is to be your hope. And this faith in Jesus is manifested most readily by how we love the saints, as well as our hope for the return of Jesus.

The Subject of our prayers (1:9-12)

9 For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God...(Colossians 1:9-10).

Jesus is to be subject of our prayers, asking that we might know Him better, have a more complete and stronger faith and that that faith would work to please Him in all respects.

The Sovereign of all (1:13-20)

The preeminence of Jesus is most graphically revealed in verses 13-20, this great and early hymn of the faith were Jesus is demonstrated to be sovereign over all the domain of darkness, 1:13-14 (of which the Colossians were formerly enslaved).

The supremacy of Jesus is seen in that He is sovereign over creation. Jesus is not simply another of the local deities to be worshipped or feared. He is not in anyway equal to or like any such power but rather is the creator of all things. He is firstborn in priority and position. All such spiritual forces (thrones, dominions, rulers and authorities) are subject to the sovereign rule of Christ, who is also not like any other spiritual force because He Himself is God, the very image of God in whom it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him (1:19).

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Finally, Jesus is sovereign over the church specifically, the very first man who was raised from the dead never to die again and thus sovereign over death itself.

II. The Power of Christ (1:21-2:23)

The end of chapter one and all of chapter two present us with the second area we need to be continually educated and encouraged in if Christ is to come to have first place in everything in our lives. We must learn the power of Christ. If we say that our last point dealt with the supremacy of Christ, then this point deals with the sufficiency of Christ. Again, no one is before Him (the preeminence and supremacy of Christ) and now we see that no one is like Him and in Him alone is all that we need for life and godliness.

In 1:21-29 we find that Jesus alone has the power to save sinners. We read in verses 21-23 –

21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, 22 yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach — 23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard...

Not only does Jesus alone have the power to save sinners, but also we find in the chapter 2 that Jesus alone has the power alone to teach the saints. He is truth and His truth alone is all that is needed, it alone is sufficient to bring the believer into full fellowship with God. In short, Jesus is the sum of all truth.

In verses 1-5 we learn that there is no reality apart from faith in Christ. Reading verses 1-3 we see –

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, 2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Truth equals Jesus. All truth is from Jesus about ultimately points back to God. Of course the world tries to find truth apart from God and explain things apart from God. Evolution is not science; it is not the quest for truth, but for an explanation of things apart from the true God. Jesus is the reality of all things. He is truth.

In verses 8-15 we learn that there is no religion apart from faith in Christ. All teachings that diminish, minimalize, or even forsake Jesus are nothing but philosophies of empty deception. Anyone or any groups that seeks to rob Jesus of His Biblically stated position as the supreme and sufficient God/man is nothing but impure and defiled religion that damns a soul to hell. And any religion that calls to worship anyone or anything other than the one true God is equally damning.

In verses 16-23 we find that there are no needed or necessary rituals apart from faith in Christ. The false teacher at Colosse was advocating that things like fasting, or keeping other

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specific rituals, would in themselves make you right with God. This my friends is legalism. And legalism is nothing more than a spirit which fails to recognize that God’s grace has made us acceptable to Him, and that human works have no part in it.” The work of Jesus alone is sufficient to make us acceptable to God. Such legalism is of no value Paul says.

Have laid the principles of why Jesus is to have first place in everything in our lives, being that He is both supreme and sovereign, Chapter 3 begins the practical side of how Jesus is to have first place in everything.

III. The Practice of Christians (3)

If we are to live in light of who Christ is and what He has done, what is it that we need to be doing? Let me offer you three things Christians can do to keep Christ first in everything.

First, we need to be continually concentrating on Christ (3:1-4). In other words, Jesus is to be preeminent in our thinking. We are commanded to “keep seeking” and to “set [our] minds” on things above; specifically on Christ.

Second, we are to be cleansed from impurity (3:5-9). We are called to consider the earthly members of our body as dead. In this we are giving Jesus and His ways first place. As we practice of putting aside all evil vices (7-8) we come to see Jesus as having first place in everything in our lives.

Third, we are to be clothed with godliness (3:10-25). Paul uses phrases like “laid aside” (9); and “put on” (10, 12 and 14) that speak of disrobing ourselves of the fallen nature of Adam and a dressing ourselves in the faithful nature of Christ. We are to be replacing evil vices like that of anger, wrath and malice (8) with eternal virtues like compassion, kindness and humility (12-14) with the peace of Christ and the word of Christ being our guide. How do we know if we have made these things our practice and by them given Christ first place in such things? Such a practice results in a godliness that affects all that we do (17) and all our relationships (18-4:1).

IV. The Proclamation of Christ (4)

How can Christ come to have first place in everything in our lives? We need to learn of Christ’s preeminence over all things, of His power over all things and of the Christians’ practice of godliness. And finally, we need to learn the proclamation, the making known of Christ through three means.

First, through prayer – (4:2-4) – **“Devote yourselves to prayer”** with a focus on making known the mystery of Christ. We give Jesus first place when we devote ourselves to prayer. We often make the confession that we are too busy to pray. May I suggest that you are too busy not to pray. There is nothing natural about prayer to our flesh. We must be taught to pray even as we learn to rely upon the Lord. Our lives and cultures are built around self-reliance and self-sufficiency. We are commanded to pray because it flies in the face of our flesh. As one preacher noted, “To people in the fast lane, determined to make it on their own, prayer is an embarrassing interruption.”

Second, through piety – (4:5-6) – **“Conduct yourselves with wisdom...”** We demonstrate Christ as having first place in our lives when we seek to live our lives before all men in such a way that even our words are coated with the grace of God. Someone has said, “Our speech to others (including unbelievers) should be characterized by the same kind of grace

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whereby God has dealt with us. Love, patience, sacrifice, and undeserved favor are aspects of grace which our speech should display.”

Third, through people (4:7-18) – **“As to all my affairs...I have sent [Tychicus] for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances...and Onesimus...they will inform you about the whole situation here.”** We find at the end of this letter a list of people whom Paul had both ministered to, as well as had ministered to him. But the point here is that unless we are willing to invest ourselves in one another, to share the truths we know about Christ as well as the burdens we have concerning our walk with Christ with others, we will not be putting Christ first. Warren Wiersbe commented, “Paul was not only a soul-winner; he was a great friend-maker. If my count is correct, there are more than 100 different Christians (named and unnamed) associated with Paul in the Book of Acts and in his epistles. He named 26 different friends in Romans 16 alone!”

Let me ask you, who are the people who are part of your affairs, your own communication to others about the working of Christ, the priority of Christ, the wonder of Christ in your life? Who is your Paul, your mentor, the one encouraging you in the things of the Lord? Who is your Timothy, your disciple, the one you are encouraging in the things of the Lord? Whose burdens are you bearing? Beloved, this is just one of the means by which we proclaim Christ and reveal that He has come to have first place in everything in our lives.

May Jesus come to have first place in everything, beginning with your knowledge of His preeminence and supremacy over all things. May this be followed by your understanding of His power and sufficiency for all things needful in your life. May this result in your practice of His standards the reveal you as chosen by God. And may all this result in your increasing proclamation of the priority of Jesus in your life in your prayers, in your piety and in the people you minister to the glory of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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