

† Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

“... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”(Colossians 1:18).

Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians The Primacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-23) The Power of the Gospel - Colossians 1:1-2

One generally does not have to attend a good Bible teaching church long before he hears those very familiar words of Romans 1:16 –

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...

And with this statement, we are to understand that the power of the gospel lies in its ability to transform and renew a life from being dead to God; neglectful of His presence, forsaking His power, denying His sovereign lordship over a life and recreating in that life a love for God, a devotion and affection for His Son, Jesus Christ, and a commitment of heart for pursuing His ways.

Sometimes we forget and limit the gospel's power, thinking it to be a one-dimensional past experience. We point back to that day, or time, or season of life when we received Jesus Christ as Savior. We remember that moment when we saw our sins as hideous violations against the holy God, deserving of His full punishment, which is death – eternal separation from the blissful, joyful, life-filled and eternal presence of God in order to experience the eternal pain and torments of the wrath of God. And we remember the relief when we learned that Jesus, God's own beloved Son, came to this earth and endured the cross for each one who would believe; namely the believer can say that Jesus paid for his own sins; that Jesus endured the wrath that he himself deserved and rather than God's judgment has received from God the gift of justification, the gift of being made right before God because the rightness, the holiness, the perfection of Jesus Christ has been given to him by faith. Because of this, the believer remembers that he has been given a hope; the hope of eternal life based not upon what he has done or can do, but rather upon what Christ has done in his place.

While the realization of this good news may take some time to be fully understood, everyone who has truly trusted Jesus Christ for salvation has come to the awareness of his own sinfulness, the holiness of God, the provision of God's Son, Jesus as his substitute for his sin, and the hope of being in God's blissful presence. This is the good news. This is the power of the gospel, to open our eyes to such truths.

But we can often be guilty of keeping this concept of salvation, this power of the gospel or good news, as a one dimensional and past experience. But the truth of the matter is this; the gospel is always for now - according to the Scriptures, the good news is that we have been saved, we are being saved and we will be saved. While the salvation of everyone who has truly trusted in Jesus Christ is secure, along with being a past experience, it is yet a multi-dimensional, present and future experience for the believer. We are to experience the gospel even now. This idea is best expressed in the words of Ephesians 2:8 –

For by grace you have been saved through faith...

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"... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything"(Colossians 1:18).

This text does not limit salvation to simply being a past experience. The way it is written in the Greek we should rightly understand this to mean, "for by grace you have been saved in the past, are yet being saved in the present and will be saved entirely in the future." This beloved, is the power of the gospel, that Jesus saves and He saves completely. Each one of us who has called upon the name of the Lord for salvation continues to be in just as much need today of the saving power and transforming effects of the cross of Christ as we did when we first received Jesus. Not one of us has arrived to perfectionism, nor will we until we see Jesus. Not one of us has been sin-free, nor will we be until we see Jesus.

So we live in this paradox of being perfectly righteous in God's sight because He looks at us through the righteous blood of His Son Jesus, and yet at the same time still struggling with and through sin. Let me tell you something. I need to be delivered or saved from my sin every bit as much today as I did 25 years ago. I am in every way in as much need for the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to be exerted in my life today as I did when I first came to Christ. I every bit as much need to hear the gospel preached today as I did on that evening when God opened my spiritual ears to hear His truth that led me to His Son Jesus as my Lord and Savior. As one noted preacher has put it, "*The gospel isn't one class among many that you'll attend during your life as a Christian – the gospel is the whole building that all the classes take place in! Rightly approached, all the topics you'll study and focus on as a believer will be offered to you 'within the walls' of the glorious gospel.*"¹

As we begin our verse by verse look at the book of Colossians, this glorious letter of the Apostle Paul that calls that first church at Colosse to see Christ as having first place in everything, let me tell you that we are looking here at the building of the gospel. The letter to the Colossians gives us a glorious panoramic view of the campus of the gospel. And in these first twenty-three verses of the opening chapter, we find Paul beginning with a presentation of the transforming nature and the primacy of the gospel. Over the next few weeks we will be noting and applying gospel truths and the first one that we begin with is this; in verses 1-2 I would have you see the very power of the gospel. For in these two verses we have reference to the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ that positively affects our relationships first to God and then to one another. Let read these two verses:

1 Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

The Power of the Gospel (1:1-2)

In these verses we find the transforming, life-changing, mind-renewing, behavior correcting, power of the gospel needs to be seen:

I. In the lives of our leaders (1:1)

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God and Timothy our brother...

The opening words of this letter point us quickly to its author or authors. Paul immediately identifies himself as the primary composer of this letter. While Timothy is also mentioned and deserving of such, it would appear that Timothy most likely served as Paul's amanuensis, the

¹ Mahaney, C.J. *The Cross Centered Life*, 75-76 (quoted by Vincent, Milton *A Gospel Primer*, p. 11)

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scribe who wrote down Paul's thoughts as he spoke them. No doubt Timothy had liberty to refine some of Paul's statements, but the apostle himself serves as the main source of information.

Now I don't feel it necessary to explain all the reasons why we know that this letter was truly written by Paul, there is a question that came to my mind and it is this: *What would make the believers at Colosse willing to listen and apply the teaching of this man whom most, if any, had never met?*

Any one who knows the story of Paul knows what a remarkable testimony of the power of the gospel his life is. What is it that got a hold of this man, this man of violence against the followers of Christ, this man who murdered believers that attended churches like ours, this man, who in his own words was a blasphemous persecutor and aggressor of the church and transformed him, changed him into a God-loving, Christ-exalting pillar of the faith that we hold dear and give praise to God for this morning? Beloved, Paul was transformed by the Gospel – the good news that I spoke of earlier. Listen to His own testimony from 1 Timothy 1:12-16

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; 14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. 15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

Why would the Colossian believers listen to Paul and receive his letter? They received it because they had heard of his testimony. Paul's life had been so radically changed that there was scarcely be a church that after praising the name of Jesus for being Lord and Savior, the great example of what Jesus does to transform a life was illustrated in the life of Paul. Paul even says as much in 1 Timothy 1:16

Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

The reason why the believers at Colosse would read and apply the teaching of this letter of Paul over the false teaching that had begun to creep into the church was because these believers had a clear testimony in the life of Paul of the transforming nature of the gospel. The best the false teacher at Colosse could do was to bring upon the believers a diminished view of Christ, a trusting in their own abilities to keep the right rules and worship the right spiritual being and feelings of condemnation and judgment. And now they receive this letter from Paul, a letter that oozes with the ability of the gospel to bring faith in Jesus, to instill love of the brethren and to encourage the hope of heaven.

Oh that we would see in the lives of the leaders in the church such a faith, such a love and such a hope. Beloved, leaders in the church are not going to be perfect (nor was Paul), but do we see in our leaders God's demonstrating His perfect patience as an example for those who

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would believe in Him for eternal life? Pray for them to do so and to be so. May those who lead in the church set examples of faith. Even as the author of Hebrews wrote in chapter 13:7 -

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

Paul was one who could be imitated because his life continually demonstrated the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so I say to you parents, are you talking to your children about when and how you came to faith in Jesus? Have you told them more than once? Do they see that when you stumble and sin, when you have those outbursts of anger, or speak ill of someone at work or of an other family member, you are convicted by the gospel of Jesus Christ, reminded of your sin, of the holiness of God who calls you to be holy and of the forgiveness of sins that is yours as you confess your sin?

And for all who attend Bible studies and discipleship groups, do you see in your leaders the transforming power of the gospel at work in them? Pray for them that such would be demonstrated. Pray for your deacons, pray for your elders, pray for your pastor. Pray not only that they would demonstrate such examples of being continually changed and transformed by the gospel, but also that you would be inspired by that transformation and seek to be just as desirous and just as determined to be transformed yourself.

The believers at Colosse had known the testimony of Paul and it was this transformation that served as one of the foundations to the success of his ministry. Of course in addition to his changed life, Paul was also commissioned by Jesus Christ Himself. Paul said in verse one that he was ***an apostle*** – a sent out one, belonging to Jesus Christ. To be an apostle was to be called by Jesus to represent Jesus and to proclaim the truths of Jesus. We know in Acts 9 Paul received this call and he immediately was transformed from a persecutor of Christ to a preacher of Christ. The power of the gospel was clearly at work in Him. So the gospel changed Paul's life, commissioned him as a preacher of Christ and all of this was, according to our text, ***"by the will of God."*** Paul was no self-proclaimed leader. He did not come in behind other teachers of the truths of God and seek to undermine the first teachings of Christ. Rather, God chose him bear the name of Christ before the Gentiles. May it be that our leaders be those whose lives reveal true godly change, who know their call from Jesus and it is evident they have been chosen by God.

In no way wanting to slight or diminish the significance of Timothy, who is so affectionately regarded by Paul as a brother in the Lord and on whom Paul vested much responsibility and authority, having traveled with Paul, being a preacher himself as well as having served in Ephesus for some time. But Timothy stands in stark contrast to Paul's background. Paul has been a Hebrew of Hebrews, a respected Pharisee and persecutor of the Church. Timothy was more like one who grew up in the church. His father was a Gentile and his mother a Jew, so that presented some issues, but from his youth he had expressed, according to 2 Timothy 1:5, a sincere faith. But regardless of whether one is saved in the church as Timothy was, or outside the church as Paul was, all those who would be leaders are to demonstrate the life-changing power of the gospel. Listen to some of the charges Paul gave to Timothy to this end:

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2 Timothy 2:15

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

1 Timothy 6:12

Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

1 Timothy 4:12

Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.

Beloved, the gospel needs to be preached with the same vigor and authority as Paul and Timothy proclaimed it. And in our proclamation, let us not be ashamed (generally for us meaning not proclaiming it) but believing it to be the true power of God for salvation, for transformation for all who believe. Let us pray for and then imitate leaders whose lives demonstrate such power as did Paul and Timothy.

II. In the lives of the believers (1:2)

To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

As Paul moves from his greeting to announce to whom he is writing, we catch a glimpse of the power of the gospel again. Remember the beginning in verse 3 and running down to verse 23 we have Paul expanding upon the gospel. So its stand to reason that Paul would address the believers at Colossae as those whose lives had also been transformed by the power of the gospel, reminding us that the church is to be a place where the evidence of such transformation takes place. But how does Paul express this transformation? He does in two manners.

First, we see how Paul recognizes the believers at Colossae. According to our text he calls them **“saints and faithful brethren in Christ.”** I think this translation is a bit misleading because the word translated “saint” – a noun, is actually an adjective in the Greek. Therefore I think it should read, “to the holy and faithful brethren in Christ” with “holy” and “faithful” being descriptions of the brethren of these believers in the church.

The word “holy” as we know, simply speaks of being set apart. But we do an injustice to so simplify the word as Paul is conveying a wealth of truth about the lives of these believers by this word. When we begin to expand our definition of “holy” we say it means to be “set apart for God’s use or service.” This is better, but let us remember what believers are set apart from. They are set apart from sin and from this world so that they might be of use for the glory of God. Because of this, we sometime speak of “holy” as meaning consecration or commitment. To be holy is to be committed to God. So by using this word “holy” we are reminded that these believer’s lives had been transformed from those who had been, in the words of 1:21, **“engaged in evil deeds”** and now committed to, in the words of 1:10, **“walk[ing] in a manner pleasing to the Lord...”** That my friends is the evidence of the transforming power of the gospel. When a life has a visible change of focus, no longer wanting to run counter to the purposes of his God. Beloved, God does not purpose for us to remain in sin, but in ever-increasing holiness; to be

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committed to such a pursuit is a sign of the power of the gospel at work. And notice well where this sign is most readily evidenced according to our text, it is evidence in the church, among the fellowship of believers who are in Christ. To be “holy” brethren then is to be committed to pleasing the Lord, particularly by means of relationship with the church. If Christ is indeed to come to have first place in everything as 1:18 informs us, such a primacy of Christ begins according to verse 18 as well as here in verse 2 within the church. In other words, if Christ is not first in the Church, then He will not be seen as first anywhere else. If we are slow or sloppy in our commitment to the church, to the brethren, then Christ will not be seen as first in everything else.

The second quality Paul places on these believers in addition to “holy” is that they are “faithful brethren”. This is the only time in Paul’s letters that he uses such a term, “faithful brethren.” The word “faithful” here in this context means commitment or allegiance. If we look at these opening verses as setting the stage for the rest of the letter, then we know from reading the letter that there are some teachings that are calling these believers away from Christ. We see this in Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive (no one steals your commitment or allegiance) through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

By calling them “faithful brethren in Christ” Paul is reminding them of their need to continue to maintain allegiance to the gospel that they had been taught. And so we read in Colossians 2:6, ***“Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him...”*** Lives that have been transformed by the gospel want to be faithful, to remain true and committed to the truth that first captivated their souls and brought them to Christ. Sometimes we need this reminder ourselves. It is easy to let the ideas of this world, the novelties of our times distract us from the transforming power of the gospel. Will you be holy and faithful? Will you be committed and true to the gospel that is the power of God for salvation? What distracts you from such a commitment? What is that competes in your heart for devotion to the gospel? Let us be holy and faithful. This is how Paul recognized the believers at Colossae.

Not only did Paul recognize these traits about the believers, but he also, and finally, states that they had and would continue to receive the divine gifts of grace and peace, saying, ***“Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”*** The lives that are being transformed by the gospel are lives that are full of the grace of God as well as the peace of God.

By “grace” Paul reminds his readers that their position as holy and faithful brethren is not founded in themselves but rather is the result of God’s unmerited intervention in their lives. To mention “grace” is to remind the believer that a part from God’s working in a life, there is no life or salvation. To mention grace is to remind the believer that he is ultimately dependent upon God power to both save him and to enable him to know, serve and love God. Paul writes, “grace to you..” – in other words, may the grace of God keep flowing, keep filling, keep empowering you. Never forget your need and dependency upon God’s grace. To know and experience Christ as having first place in everything is an exercise of God’s grace within us, calling us to prayer, encouraging us in faith, stimulating us to love, assuring us of our hope of eternal life. The gospel teaches us of this grace, and calls us to depend upon this grace.

In addition to grace, Paul speak also of “peace”, which speaks to us of the rest and confidence we have now with God as our Father because of the sacrifice of Christ. Because of Jesus death, because of His atonement, Jesus has made peace between the believers and God.

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The Bible calls this reconciliation and you might notice that verses 20-22 speak of this reconciliation, this peace we now have with God because Jesus died on the cross for our sins. As Paul begins this letter then, his desire is that these believers might experience and enjoy in increasing manner the grace and peace that comes from God our Father. The power of the gospel is that sinners are taught that God is gracious and compassionate, that He has sent the remedy for our condition in the person of His Son, and that all who will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

To call upon the name of the Lord for salvation is to know that you are a sinner, to know that apart from a relationship with the Lord, apart from being changed by the Lord, you are dead in your trespasses and sins. To call upon the Lord is to repent, to say no to sin and to ungodliness and to worldly desires. And just like our salvation is a past, present and future experience, please know that for the believer in Christ, regardless of whether he has know Jesus as Lord and Savior for one minute, one year or one hundred years, still has the need to repent, to constantly be evaluating his life and where he sees it turning from God, he would now turn back to God. Beloved, it is the power of the gospel, this good news that we have been granted repentance as we come to Christ, this changing of our hearts and minds toward sin that we might now long to love and obey Jesus Christ, that ought to be made more and more evident in each of our lives and be the testimony of the church to the glory of God.

Let us be continually changed by the power of the gospel. Let us long to see the transformations toward Christlikeness in our leaders as well as in each of our lives, that we would know that the saving grace and peace of our Lord is among us and that the world that looks at us might see the working of God in our lives to His glory.

Soli Deo Gloria

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