

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 Proof of the Gospel - Colossians 1:3-8 (Part 1)

Colossians 1:3-8

3 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 6 which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth; 7 just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, 8 and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit.

Imagine with me if you would that you and I are taking a walk down a country road. We are enjoying the scenery and the fresh air. Many of you already know that I love nature and wildlife. I love to come across creatures of all sorts and this fondness also extends to snakes. I find snakes to be fascinating and misunderstood creatures. You have this knowledge that I know snakes. Now, if we were walking down that road and came across a snake, how would you respond? For some of you, it wouldn't matter at all that I can identify snakes. At the mere sight or even mention of a snake, your response would fall somewhere between “run for your life” or just “pass out.”

Others of you might be fearfully curious and ask me a question. Some of the first questions might be, “What kind of snake is it?” or better yet, “Is it poisonous?” If I could rightly identify the snake and tell you it is not poisonous, how would you respond? You might be glad to know that it is not poisonous but want to give it plenty of room. You might not care that it not poisonous and recite the mean-spirited mantra, “The only good snake is a dead snake.” But then you see me going up to this non-poisonous snake (disclaimer – kids never do this, I have studied for a long time to know what I am doing) – I go up to the snake and carefully capture it. How do you respond? Those of you who passed out at the beginning of the encounter are about ready to relapse. Others would be creeped out and still stay clear. And some of you, while yet timid, would think that if it is safe enough for Ed to handle, surely you could go look at it and maybe even touch it.

Isn't it interesting how many different ways we all could respond to the same thing. We all have different responses to the snake, from excitement, to trepidation, to utter terror. But the point is this, while we all respond a bit differently, we all respond, for God designed us to respond. When we are presented with some bit of reality, we are forced to make decisions as to how we will respond to that reality, be it a wild animal or even some type of information, fact or truth.

In our study of Colossians thus far, we have been focused upon the gospel, this good news that while each and every one is alienated and hostile to God, engaged in evil deeds (Colossians 1:21), which is a fancy way of saying we are in the condition of sin, yet God, by means of the death of His Son, Jesus, on the cross, has reconciled us to Himself, He, not we, but

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He has made peace between us, who deserve His wrath, anger and eternal punishment, and Himself and has graciously given us the promise, the hope of dwelling forever in His presence.

The gospel message reminds us that before Christ comes in and changes our hearts, we are dead in our trespasses and sins and yet for those who believe, God has made us alive in Jesus, alive to the truth that we are sinners who need a savior; alive to the truth that if we try to live for ourselves or by ourselves we damn ourselves; but that when we submit to Jesus as Lord, we have an abundant life before us. Beloved, the gospel is not about making bad people good and good people better; no the gospel is about making dead people alive. Alive to God; loving God; serving God; trusting God and being raised to newness of life, holiness of life in the likeness of Jesus. This is the gospel.

But the question is, “how do you respond to this?” What is your response to this “good news” – this gospel of hope? Whereas each one of you might respond just a little bit differently on our encounter with the snake, when it comes to the gospel, everyone responds, but ultimately there are only two responses; you either deny or diminish your need of the gospel, or you respond as 1 Thessalonians 2:13 says,

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God [the gospel] which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

How have you responded to the gospel? And better yet, how do you respond daily to the gospel? Notice that the word of God, this gospel, has power, it performs a work in those who believe. Last week we started looking at what we called the proofs of the gospel. How can we know that we have believed and that the gospel, which is called the power of God unto salvation, is truly at work in us? How can we know that we have responded correctly to the gospel?

Again, from last week, we noted a few of the proofs of the gospel’s power at work in us. First, the power of the gospel is seen when we are thankful to God for seeing the gospel, God’s word, at work in the lives of others. Paul begins his letter thanking God for work of the gospel in the lives of the Colossians. Do you thank God for His working in the lives of your brothers and sisters in Christ? Can you identify His working in their lives?

The second proof we looked at from verses 4-5 was what we called the fruits of the gospel. If the gospel is at work, then it produces the fruit of faith, that is a genuine trust and realization of one’s need for Jesus as Savior and Lord; the fruit of love of all the brethren, that is a real care, compassion, concern and respect for those with whom you fellowship as well as those who are of the church far off; and also the fruit of hope; that is living with and in anticipation of heaven. These are fruits that we ought to be seeing in ourselves and in one another if the power of the gospel is at work.

This morning I would like to look at the next proof of the power of the gospel at work in us, that proof being a proper response to gospel. How do you respond to the gospel? I am not asking you this, “How did you respond to the gospel in the past?” This is not a question about your past testimony but your current testimony. While it is good and interesting to know about your past experiences by which you should be able to give a testimony, a reason as to why you have the hope of Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, the question I am asking is this, “How do

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you respond, right now, today, to the gospel?” From Colossians 1:5b-8, let us identify three responses that each one who professes Christ is to have and continue to have if the power of the gospel is at work in them.

I. We must see the gospel as revelation (1:5)

because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel...

When people hear the gospel, the message about Jesus taught or preached to them they must either consciously or unconsciously make a response. They might respond by either dismissing or denying that what they hear does not really apply to them. The straight statements of the word of God are said to only be “interpretations” of what God really meant, or merely quaint thoughts from an ancient culture that has no bearing or relevance for them today. How is it that someone could be so dismissive of the good news? Who, in their right mind would ever reject the gospel, which is called in our text, **“the word of truth”** – the very revelation of God to man? The issue is that such a one is not in his right mind. The Bible says that those who are calloused by unbelief have consciences that are seared as with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:2). Such a person’s mind thinks more highly of man and natural things because without the Spirit of God in his heart and mind, he cannot **“accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised”** (1 Corinthians 2:14).

But where the power of the gospel is at work, so is the Spirit of God and such a one will understand that what he hears about Jesus as being Savior and Lord, the one who came to die in the place of sinners, and puts his trust in Him to be his substitute and his righteousness and to make him holy, this one has proof of the power of the gospel. This one sees God’s word as “truth” – as the very revelation of God to man. This one believes the statement of Micah 6:8, **“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”** This is the one who confesses with his mouth Jesus as Lord. This is the one who believes in his heart that God raised Jesus from the dead and that Jesus died for his sins (Romans 10:9). This is the one who calls upon the name of the Lord to be saved (Romans 10:13). This is the one repents, turns away from his sin, and cries out for forgiveness (Acts 2:38). This is the one who turns to God from his idols, from his sinful, God-dishonoring pursuits in order to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Our text calls this gospel, the word of truth. The idea here is that the gospel is the message that reveals or contains that which is true. In the Old Testament, the idea behind truth is something that can be relied upon because it comes from God. How do you respond to the gospel? Do you really see it as God’s revelation, God’s truth to you? Do you continue to rely upon it, depend upon it and base your life upon it? Remember in John 17:17 Jesus referred to the totality of God’s word as “truth” as that which is to be relied upon. In Psalm 119:160 the psalmist wrote, **“The sum of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting.”** What is your response to this? Is it like the psalmist who said in Psalm 119:43, **“And do not take the word of truth utterly out of my mouth, for I wait for**

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Your ordinances.” Those who are being affected by the power of the gospel see and take God’s word as “truth” and proceed by that power and truth to live their lives accordingly.

How do you respond to truth? How do you respond to the gospel? Do you try to dismiss it? Do you respond like Pharaoh, who even in light of seeing God’s truth as preached by Moses and experiencing God’s truth by experience yet hardened his heart and refused to be changed? Do you respond to truth like Esau, who being more concerned about filling his belly, of satisfying his own earthly appetite, brushed aside God’s truth and became godless? And even more subtly, let us beware and learn from Peter, who brushed aside the truth of Jesus for a moment and ended up denying his Lord three time and cursing. Even believers must be wary of momentarily dismissing God’s truth to the detriment of their relationship with God and their testimony before men.

The gospel is the word of truth. The gospel is heard as God’s truth and when the gospel’s power is at work it begins to over take you. Look at verse six. It is this gospel that Paul says, **“has come to you.”** The gospel knocks on the door of your heart and begs a response. Here is the truth it says. You need to hear of your disease as a sinner, alienate and hostile to God. But you also need to hear the remedy; Jesus heals; Jesus saves, Jesus cures the disease of sin with the delight of service to God. Is this the gospel at work in you? As we have been fond of asking from time to time, “How far do you want your relationship with Jesus to go?” What is holding you back? Confess it, repent of it, and believe that the gospel is God’s truth, God’s revelation come to you to change you, take you and make you His.

II. **We must see the gospel as relentless**

the gospel 6 which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth

Not only are we to see the gospel as God’s revelation, but secondly, let us note that we are to see the gospel as utterly relentless. Let us read verse six. Notice that the gospel has not only come to the Colossians, it is not only a message for them, but it is a message and has the power to go forth in all the world. The power of the gospel cannot be contained. The gospel is relentless. It is bound and determined to change people. The gospel is fierce and ferocious, unafraid to confront sin, and unhindered in its exaltation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The gospel, the pure preached gospel is unyielding, unbending, uncompromising, unflinching, and simply unstoppable. Isaiah 55, a remarkable chapter, states boldly in verses 10-11 -

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

Where the gospel is let loose by the mouths and testimony of God’s people, the gospel transforms. It continues to transform the very lives of the people who proclaim it. Very six teaches us that the gospel is constantly, relentlessly bearing fruit and increasing. That verb

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“**constantly bearing fruit**” is in the present tense and means “without end.” While it speaks of a tree that constantly is giving fruit, the picture for us is that the person who has the power of the gospel at work in him is one whose very conduct or behavior is constantly showing forth godly fruit. Yes, there may be a bad apple here or there, a momentary lapse into sin, but overall and continually that tree will bear fruit.

And to emphasize this we also have the word “increasing” – the idea here being of growing, getting bigger and bigger and of spreading out. The tree of the gospel in our lives is not to remain a weak and tender sapling, but is to grow into a mighty and towering oak. The gospel is relentless. It keeps going and growing. The working of the gospel in our lives is to be like the waves of the ocean...nothing holds them back. As the gospel increases in our lives, it will increase our faith in Christ Jesus, it will strengthen our love for the church, and it will confirm our hope of heaven. Is your response to the gospel to see it as relentless? Can you give the testimony this morning that the power of the gospel is constantly bearing fruit and increasing to the glory of God? As I asked you before, I ask you again, “How far do you want your relationship with Jesus to go?” What is holding you back? Confess it, repent of it, and believe that the gospel is relentless and ask God to see its relentless work in you.

III. We must see the gospel as receivable

...just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf

So, we have seen that the gospel is to be seen as revelation and as relentless. Finally, let us see the gospel as receivable. Reading from verse 7.

Let us note a few things about Paul’s statements concerning Epaphras. First, we learn that nothing has changed about the gospel since the time Paul first preached to Epaphras and since Epaphras first preached it to the Colossians. Time, circumstances, or any earthly changes do not change or allow for a change to the gospel’s truth. Remember that someone in that church was trying to change the gospel. Paul says “no” – the gospel is just as you learned it from Epaphras.

Second, Paul calls Epaphras “**our beloved fellow bond-servant**” – that is to say that he was in true partnership with Paul and Timothy concerning the gospel. They were all on the same page. Third, Paul calls Epaphras “**a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf**” – meaning that what Epaphras taught the Colossians was again in faithful compliance to the teachings of Christ and of Paul and Timothy.

And here is the point, a proper response to the true gospel is to receive it, not as the word of men, but as the Word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13). It is to learn about it as it is consistently taught in accordance to the teachings of the apostles. Paul and the apostles learned the gospel from Christ and then these men taught other men, who were to teach other men (2 Timothy 2:2). So then, so long as I teach you according to the teachings of Paul, or Peter, or John, or Isaiah or Moses, then you are and can receive such as the gospel, the good news of God. If my teaching strays from God’s Word, then it is not good news. Jude 3 says it this way:

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Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

The gospel does not need tweaking. It does not have to be made relevant. It is not outdated but is to be preached and as it is preached the proper response is to receive it, to learn it.

And let me make this application as we consider what it means to learn the gospel. Remember that the Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 was not given only to apostles or pastors or church leaders. No, the Great commission is given to every Christian and it implies a daily exercise of witness for Christ by word and by life. This is how the early church understood it. Read with me carefully Acts 5:42:

And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Here we see the apostles teaching the gospel how often? Every day! But this was only for the apostles, right. Well, as the apostles continued to teach and preach Jesus and the persecution against Christians got more intense, what happened? Did the preaching and teaching of Jesus slow? Was it only the apostles who were brave enough to teach and preach? Look at Acts 8:4. The context is this, Paul, who was then Saul, had just had Stephen stoned to death and was violently persecuting the church, men and women. Many in the church were being scattered everywhere. What was the result? The gospel's power was diminished, right? Wrong! Acts 8:4 says,

Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.

These people had learned the power of the gospel, that as they preached it and taught it, they were teaching the revelation of God, that the gospel was relentless and that as it is preached, it will be received; it will be learned by many. Beloved, let us remember that the work Jesus began to make disciples for Himself to the glory of God has not yet been completed. Every believer is commanded to ***“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation”*** (Mark 16:15). Remember that the gospel contains the truth about the person, the work and the teachings of Jesus. Remember that Jesus did not say in Mark 16:15 or Matthew 28:19 to “send” but to “go”. We do need those faithful servants of Christ who will leave their own comforts to preach the gospel to other ethnic groups and other nations, but each one of us is to go and reach our world with the power of the gospel.

The command of Jesus in Acts 1:8 says ***“you shall be My witnesses (by the power of the Holy Spirit) both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”*** This does not mean that the gospel is preached first in our own family and then hometown and then state and then country and then world while we forget about the first ones we taught the gospel. No, the church is to be simultaneously teaching and preaching the

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gospel in all these arenas so that it might be received by those who believe, that its relentless nature might be let loose and so that it might be seen as God’s truth, God’s revelation to man.

How do you respond to the gospel? The early church responded. The church at Colossae responded; and note what happened as they did. Acts 6:7 tells us:

The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Let us pray that we would see the Word of God spread. Let us not just say with our mouths that we desire to be constantly bearing fruit and increasing, but being able to point to the fruit and increase. Let us not be content with anything less than seeing the number of disciples continue to increase. Let us respond to the gospel believing that it is more than able to accomplish these things in us, if indeed we respond rightly to it.

Soli Deo Gloria

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