

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 Colossians 2:8-10 The Ugly Truth About Christ (Part 1)

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

Charles Spurgeon once noted, **“Faith must be strong, or love will not be fervent; the root of the flower must be healthy, or we cannot expect the bloom to be sweet.”**

What Spurgeon was getting after with this statement is that if believers are going to rightly love Christ; and if their lives are to be spiritually healthy and their fragrance a sweet aroma to God, then they must have a strong faith, that is, they must know doctrine; they must know what they believe and why they believe it. And this is nowhere more important than what we know and believe about Jesus Christ [John 17:3].

As we find our way back to the letter to the believers at Colossae, let me remind you of the purpose of Paul’s writing. We all have a purpose and intention in writing a letter or an email; we have something we want to make known. And at the very heart of Paul’s letter is the conviction that *how a person behaves; how a person lives his life; and how a person thinks - is to be guided and motivated by proper theology [that ugly, intimidating word – theology, the study of God]; by a right understanding of what the Bible teaches.* And for Paul, proper theology, sound doctrine, or good, biblical teaching, all centers on the person and the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is, according to Paul and what he wrote in Colossians 1:18, is to come to have first place, top priority in everything; from the time we wake up in the morning, until the moment we lay our heads down to rest; from the first thoughts we consider until our last reflection upon the day; from the first thing we do, until the last action we perform, we were created to bring praise and glory and honor to Jesus Christ. According to the Word of God in Colossians 3:2, our theology [what we believe about Christ] is to drive us to “set [our] mind on things above, not on things that are on earth; to seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

But I have entitled our study today, “The Ugly Truth About Christ.” How is that for controversial? How is that for provocative? What on earth could be ugly truth about Jesus? Glad you asked. For I freely confess that there is truly no such thing as ugly truth in Christ; but as our text reveals, there certainly can be ugly truth about Christ. And so, what is ugly truth about Christ? Beloved, for blessed Paul, any teaching or any way of thinking that distracts the heart from Jesus Christ, or any influence that detracts from the supremacy of Jesus Christ as God come to us; or detracts from the sufficiency of Jesus Christ as the only author and finisher of our salvation is ugly truth, truly a non-truth about Jesus. Such ideas are to be identified, utterly rejected and then thoroughly replaced with proper theology; a right understanding of Jesus Christ. And as we will come to see, while the distractions and detractions from Christ may be different in form for us today than they were for the believers at Colossae, we are just as vulnerable, just as susceptible, just as tempted daily to fall into subtle misguided and misinformed teachings about Jesus. Woe to us if we think we are somehow better, more spiritually superior to avoid the subtle pressures and influences of the world around that would diminish our appreciation of and our submission to Jesus Christ as, according to verse 10 of our text, **“the head over all rule and**

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authority.” The ugly truth about Christ is this – it is our natural tendency to be enticed away from the true Christ to embrace a diminished and therefore deficient view of Christ.

This morning then we wish to see how Paul made a great transition in this letter from one of the most doctrinally profound treatments of the person of Jesus Christ in Colossians 1:9 through 2:7 laying the foundation for both the supremacy of Christ, who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things, the head of the church and truly the Sovereign Lord to whom all will come to see as first and supreme (1:15-18); as well as the absolute sufficiency of Christ who has reconciled us to God [brought us near to God; taking our punishment, taking the wrath we deserved], made peace between us and God through the blood of His cross. And all this not while we sat innocently and passively on the sideline, but rather as we were alienated, hostile in mind and engaged in evil deeds (1:20-22). Now that, beloved is good, sound, theology – the supremacy of Christ and the sufficiency of Christ. It is this that ought to guide and direct how we behave, how we live our lives so that we might strive to 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 (1:10). Proper theology drives proper, godly behavior. Or to say it once again with the eloquence of Spurgeon, “Faith [what we know and believe about Christ] must be strong, or love [our attitude, actions and behavior toward Christ] will not be fervent; the root of the flower must be healthy [proper theology], or we cannot expect the bloom to be sweet [proper behavior or results].”

To address this ugly truth about Christ, which is really just man’s nature to easily succumb to bad theology concerning Jesus, Paul, in verse 8, first gives a warning by which he identifies nature, the danger and the source of all wrong thinking about Christ; and then follows this in verses 9-10 with the solution by which believers can avoid or even correct such wrong thinking. This morning we will concentrate on verse 8 and consider the warning to combat bad teaching concerning Christ.

I. Beware of bad teaching concerning Christ (2:8)

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

Our text begins with a word of warning, as Paul uses an imperative, a verb of command, exhorting believers, “**See to it that no one takes you captive...**” The warning is “**see to it**” – but this is a word that does not must mean to look at or to look at casually. It speaks of taking great care and being on one’s guard. It means “to be ready to learn about future dangers or needs, with the implication of preparedness to respond appropriately - ‘to beware of, to watch out for, to pay attention to.’” And so, just as you would tread carefully after seeing the sign that read, “Beware of dog!” - so now you are to be carefully watching out for something; some dangerous teaching, any teaching that diminishes, or makes Jesus little in your eyes. Be on your guard!

A. Its nature (8a)

See to it that no one takes you captive...

Why? Why must we be on guard? Because beloved, there is a teaching, or multitudes of teachings out there that can easily take you *captive*. Without applying the solutions that Paul gives in the next verses, we can easily be captured and imprisoned into thinking Jesus as small,

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as little, as just something extra but not complete. And here we see the very nature of bad teaching concerning Christ, that it can be captivating; that it can so easily lead us astray. The word “captive” speaks of being carried off as spoils or prisoners of war. Let me give you some idea behind the nature of bad teaching concerning Christ. It can kidnap you – it steals you away from the truth. It can cheat you out of the very blessings of trusting in Christ alone. False teachers are like tricksters who can rob you blind without you even knowing it. So what is the warning? You had better know that there are people who want to rob you of a high view of Christ. Not everyone who “confess Christ” actually knows Christ.

The warning is that we must not carelessly follow a personable, amiable, or dynamic religious leader merely because he “preaches Jesus” or calls on people to “receive the Spirit.” Make no mistake beloved, “Jesus” is still very popular today among many people of the world. The problem is that their “Jesus” is not the true Jesus. The Jesus of our culture may only be the sweet babe of the manger at Christmastime. Or He may be the “buddy” Jesus heard in so many of today’s books and seminars. He may be the romantic Jesus of so much of today’s Christian music. He may be the success granting Jesus of the positive thinkers. And there is a Jesus of the internet, a Jesus that can be anything or anyone you want Him to be because there are as many views of who Jesus is as there are noses. But beloved, none of these is the true, Biblical Jesus who saves and who was preached by Paul and revealed to us in the Word. Beware of a Jesus who does not or cannot save you to the uttermost. Beware of a Jesus who merely makes salvation possible if you do the right things, jump through the right hoops, or merit enough favor with God. Beware of a Jesus who owes you something as your due rather than embracing the gracious Jesus who saves us while we were helpless, hopeless, hostile enemies of Him. This is the nature of bad teaching concerning Jesus – Jesus is not enough; it is Jesus plus other things.

B. Its danger (8b)

...through philosophy and empty deception...

What is the danger of such bad teaching concerning Jesus? Obviously, as I just alluded to, any teaching that does not present Jesus as supreme and sufficient, but rather only as a small piece of what the Bible teaches He is or only as a part of what I can also do to please God to earn salvation makes such a teaching damning rather than life-giving.

Paul calls it here “philosophy” – which literally means the love of knowledge. But the way Paul uses it here refers to much more than simply the academic and intellectual pursuit of knowledge. Here it speaks of any kind of human speculation and understanding as opposed to what is revealed in the Word of God. The theory of evolution is this kind of “philosophy” because it seeks to understand the word from man’s explanations rather than God’s. But this kind of wisdom is not limited to the discipline of logical or analytical study. John Calvin said it best when he described this word as meaning, “everything that men contrive of themselves when wishing to be wise on their own understanding.” This is why it is so dangerous. When wisdom becomes the product of man, it become subjective and relativistic. We begin to say things like, “Well, that may be fine and true for you, but it is not for me because...” This is why Paul calls it “empty deception”. It is hollow, not what it appears to be [chocolate bunnies]. There is nothing but emptiness in man’s thinking apart from God’s Word. And such emptiness, while it may sometimes sound good, is a deception because again, it takes a person captive and leads them

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away from the truth of God’s Word and it begins to make Jesus smaller and smaller in a person’s life. And this leads us to consider the very source of such teaching.

C. Its source (8c)

...according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

Notice that the source of this teaching is not based upon God’s Word – it is not based upon what Scriptures says about Christ, but rather upon what? It is based first upon the **“traditions of men.”** The idea here is of teaching that is handed down from one generation to the next – of men collaborating together to communicate a body of teaching. And at first glance it might be asked, “Is it not true that some of the teachings of the Bible are also traditions, truths handed down from one generation to the next.” Look at what we read in 2 Thessalonians 3:2 -

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.

And then let us look at 2 Timothy 2:1-2 where we read:

1 You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Yes, there is to be a “Christian tradition” and this handed down teaching does come through men, but it is not the traditions of man, but the traditions of Christ as we see at the end of verse 8. What does this mean? It means that while much of what God revealed was handed down from generation to generation, this issue is does it find its source or origin in Christ or only in men? Beloved, any truth that you believe, you ought to be able to trace back to its Biblical foundations. You ought to be able to take anything I say here as being the precept of God and know for yourselves that what I have said finds its proof in the Word of God. [the example of an evangelical teacher using Psalm 2 to suggest that God loves to laugh with us and is a jolly sort of being, when the context is one of judgment, not jolliness. If you receive teaching that says, “According to Psalm 2, God loves to laugh with us” and you simply respond with an attitude of gratitude that God is so jolly based on that passage, you have just received the traditions of men, not the traditions of Christ.] And while I don’t want to say that the Christian teacher who said that is false, he did employ one of the tactics that are used by false teacher who will make either obvious distortions to the word of God to support their doctrines or they will avoid the Bible all together. This is why everything is to be tested according to what...according to God’s Word.

But let me make this even more practical. Let me speak first to the children here; many of you have been blessed to grow up in Christian homes and have heard the Bible stories and the gospel. And you need to listen to it; but eventually you will need to believe all the stories and respond to the good news the Jesus died for your sins on the cross to give you new life, a life that lives for God; not because your parents told you; or because your Pastor challenges you, but because you have gone to the source, you see it for yourself in the Word of God and believe it

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because God has opened your eyes. It is not enough for you to say, “Because my parents believe it, I believe it...” At some point you must be able to say, “Because the Bible teaches it, I believe it.” We must be able to trace what we believe back to the Word of God.

And let me also challenge those of us (and I include myself), who love our MacArthur Study Bibles, or our Reformation Study Bibles (full of “cheat sheets”), or love a certain preacher or his commentaries on the Bible. If you believe something just because one of these people said it in their study Bible or commentary, you are risking believing something based upon human tradition rather than, as Paul says later, according to Christ. I love what Paul said to the believers at Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 -

13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God 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.

They heard the truth from men, from Paul and his companions, but then they were able to trace it back to being God’s Word. I have had times when I have read something John MacArthur says is true about God’s Word and he may have appealed to James M. Boice, who appealed to D. Martyn-Lloyd Jones, who appealed to Spurgeon and so on. And while it has been my experience that such a line would be trustworthy, unless I continue to follow that line all the way back to the Scriptures themselves, I am potentially basing my belief on simple human tradition. We must not be content to stop our appeals to truth upon simply the traditions of men. We truly need to be like the Berean believers of northern Greece of whom it is said in Acts 17:11, **“for they received the word [the preaching of Paul] with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures [not just on Sunday] daily to see whether these things were so.”**

Beloved, the source of our understanding of Christ must not be based solely upon the traditions of men, but rather upon or according to Christ, the tradition of Christ.

But there is source of false teaching that Paul calls **“the elementary principles of the world.”** The **“elementary principles”** speaks of things that are in a row, like an alphabet. So we will speak of the ABC’s of parenting, or the ABC’s of playing baseball to refer to the very basics or elementary principles of those activities. And here Paul speaks of false teaching, teaching that diminishes Christ as being based upon the most basic the most banal [buhnal], the most natural of things. What does he mean? Beloved, false teachers generally appeal to man’s more base or natural instincts. And in the context of Colossians, man’s natural instinct is to love the idea that his efforts, his labors, his ingenuity is to be rewarded. And this gets applied to salvation, man loves the idea that he can earn God’s grace (which is a contradiction in terms, for grace that is earned is not grace at all). And so these false teacher erect a lavish system of dos and don’ts, of laws and legalisms, of worship of other creatures and beings in addition to Christ, even if that other creature is man himself. This is what Paul describes just a few verse down from our text. Look with me at Colossians 2:18-19 -

18 Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, 19 and not holding fast to the head [having a low-view of Christ], from

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whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

Remember that we are to “**see to it**” that we are not taken captive by any such teaching and we must note that the foundation of any false teaching concerning Christ is generally simply trying to add something to Him. According to verse 23 such teachings will have “**the appearance of wisdom**” but is yet self-made religion, not according to Christ. Such teachings can appeal to our flesh because by them we believe that we are able to contribute something to our salvation; Christ plus what we do and by such thinking we diminish Christ’s supremacy as Lord as well as His sufficiency as Savior. One of the first areas that is affected by a diminished view of Christ is our behavior because just as proper theology about Christ is to guide godly behavior; the reverse is also true, that improper theology about Christ guides one toward ungodly behavior. Let us seek to have a strong faith, a fervent love, that the root of our flower is healthy in our contemplation of Christ so that our bloom may reflect the gloriousness of Christ in all that we do. Or to say it in the words of Colossians 1:10, “**so that [we] 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...**”

Soli Deo Gloria

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