

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

Who Do You Say That He Is?

If you would turn in your Bible to Matthew 16, yes Matthew 16 as we consider a familiar yet important exchange between our Lord Jesus Christ and Peter, the spokesman of the disciples. Let us begin reading in Matthew 16:13 and read through verse 16:

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

With Peter’s statement we find that both he and the rest of the disciples are acknowledging something different, something great, something significant, something wonderful about Jesus Christ. For a first century Jew to look upon a man, a rabbi, a poor, itinerant preacher and use loaded prophetic terms like “Christ” – meaning “Messiah” – the Old Testament term for the Anointed One of God who would come and deliver His people; as well as “Son of the living God” – speaking not that Jesus was somehow less than God, but the term Son of God meaning “of the order of God” and this coupled with the truth that Jesus is of the order; that is in the likeness; the very representation of “living” God in the flesh. These terms signified that Jesus totally unique in His person, in His power and in His purpose.

There is much more there that could be said, but what I would also have you notice in this Matthew text is that there were others; other of a religious sort; others with an interest in Jesus; and others that we otherwise decent, moral people who had a diminished view of Jesus, thinking Him to be less than what He is; thinking Him to be some kind of manifestation of John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Even at the time of Christ walking this earth, people were entertaining small view of Jesus.

Some thirty years later, as Paul is writing this letter to the church at Colossae, people, religious people were still entertaining exotic, elaborate and yet diminishing views of Christ. Some thought Jesus to be only one of many spiritual beings that need to be worshipped and appeased through self-made religion and the rigorous keeping of a list of dos and don’ts. Some thought Jesus to be merely a conduit through whom more mysterious and deeper knowledge may be obtained that would exalt a person above others. Some thought that adding to the knowing of Jesus the rites of circumcision or the keeping of the law of God saved a person. All such thinking was not exalting Jesus, it was lowering Jesus; making Him far less than who or what He really was.

And while such thinking and teaching was not yet seemingly present in the church at Colossae, it was nevertheless all around them and the temptation is always this, that if you hear nothing but a lie long enough you might well eventually accept it as a truth. And now, some 2000 years later; nothing has changed. The church is still surrounded by a chorus of views, opinions, thoughts, theologies, philosophies, traditions of men, and elementary principles of this world concerning Jesus rather than receiving what God’s Word declares about Jesus.

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As I was driving to the church the other day I heard a radio talk show discussing what Mormons believe about Jesus. To understand this, we take a step back to understand what Mormonism teaches about God and man. To them, and this is their own wording, “As man is, God once was; as God is man may become.” According to Mormon theology, God is nothing more than an exalted man, living with an exalted woman somewhere in the beyond. This exalted man and his goddess had what are termed “celestial relations” and she conceived and had numerous “spirit babies” – the spirits of all people who would eventually be born.

The first of these spirit babies is Jesus; making Jesus a created being, even citing Colossians 1:15 as “proof” of their teaching; but which of course is not the meaning of the term “firstborn of all creation” as we have already seen. The second of these spirit babies is Lucifer; making Jesus and Lucifer spiritual brothers. To answer the question as to how the spirit baby Jesus became a man, Mormons teach that God the Father, this now exalted man, came down to earth and had “relations” with Mary whom conceived and gave birth to Jesus and the unique and only begotten Son of God. My point is not to get deep into Mormon theology, but to point out that diminished teaching about Jesus is out there. The Jehovah’s Witnesses believe Jesus to be a created being. The secularist, the humanist, and the otherwise non-religious see Jesus at best as a good teacher or a man of great morals and at worst as a rogue Jewish rabbi that caused and continues to cause nothing but inconvenience and controversy.

But what we can fail to understand as Christians, as those who want to proclaim and exalt Jesus, is that just because someone says they believe in Jesus, does not mean they believe in the Biblical Jesus. And yet we can either be too timid or too uncertain about what we believe concerning Jesus that we fail to ask the very question that Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Beloved, we must be truly apologetic, that is providing a biblical defense for who Jesus really is. We must not only know for ourselves who Jesus is, but we must also be asking others, “Who do you say that Jesus is?” Not only are the Colossians to see to it that they are not distracted by diminished view of Christ, but we too are to follow the same pursuit. And so, as we come to Colossians 1:9-10, we find Paul, and more importantly the Holy Spirit, providing for the Colossians and for us the solution to the problem of bad theology, unsound teaching and diminishing views of Jesus Christ.

So then, whereas last week we saw from verse 8 the warning to beware of bad teaching concerning Christ, we find as the solution to this in verses 9-10 the call to embrace sound teaching concerning Christ. Let us read now Colossians 1:8-10:

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. 9 For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, 10 and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority...

I. Embrace sound teaching concerning Christ (2:9-10)

9 For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, 10 and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority...

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After the warning of verse 8, Paul immediately comes back to Jesus Christ; to who He is, what He is like and what He has done. For Paul, there is no one else but Jesus; there is no one else He can point either himself or others to than to come to know Jesus in His fullness.

For Paul, Jesus is the foundation. For Paul, Jesus is the treasure (2:3). And such is to be the same for every believer. Jesus is to be for us the pearl of great price; our highest pursuit and our greatest passion. Of all the things we say about Jesus in song, singing that Jesus is our life, Jesus is our joy; Jesus is our delight; might I ask you if this is your experience? Have you somehow, somewhere been taken captive by lesser thoughts and experiences of Jesus? Have you been spiritually kidnapped from the true knowledge of Christ? And if we have even to the smallest of degrees, how do we shake ourselves loose from such bondage? How do we avoid such captivity? Beloved, we are instructed to always come back to the fundamental truths about Jesus and in our text there are no less than four such fundamental truths by which you ought to be able to answer the question, “Who do you say that Jesus is?” and by which you ought to both encourage and challenge others in their understanding of who Jesus is.

A. Jesus is the fullness of deity (9a)

For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells...

The first foundation concerning who is Jesus is found in the opening words of verse 9, **“For in Him [in Jesus] all the fullness of deity dwells...”** In other words, in Jesus is the fullness of Deity. Whatever the bad teaching concerning Jesus included, we know that it constantly denigrated Jesus. The false teachers were painting a picture of Jesus that said He was okay, but there was more; there were secrets and mysteries awaiting anyone who would follow them through the initiation rites of their teachings; who would worship who and what they said to worship and do or restrain from what they said ought to be done. It was all right to be saved by Jesus, and to believe that Jesus helps you to be saved, but there was much more to spirituality than merely being saved. In such teachings, Jesus was nothing more than a small piece of a bigger puzzle that they had figured out.

How does Paul counter such diminishing thoughts about Christ? He pulls his readers back to consider the absolute all-sufficiency of the person of Jesus Christ saying, **“For in Him all the fullness of Deity [the Godhead] dwells in bodily form.”** Do you tire of hearing the same truths about Christ over and over? This letter is a constant refrain of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Do you need to hear it again? Yes, over and over again as this is the antidote to the poison of small thoughts about Christ. Every proclamation of Paul concerning Jesus is simply his own dipping into the deep well of the vastness Christ. Only Jesus would satisfy Paul thirst and Paul knew that only Jesus would satisfy the believer’s thirst. So then, salvation, life, peace, contentment, everything good, everything right is to be found in Christ and Christ alone.

So when Paul declares that **“all the fullness of deity”** is in Jesus, Paul is answering the question, “Who do you say that Jesus is?” by answering that Jesus is God. Everything that makes God God; every characteristic, every attribute, every capability is found in Jesus. When we think of the infinite nature of divine mercy, of grace, and of love, all such fullness is found in Jesus. And when we think of the awesome and often fearful characteristics of divine wrath, justice, and righteousness; these too are found without limit in Jesus.

We are told that **“all [inclusive] the fullness of Deity dwells”** in Jesus. The verb **“dwells”** means “to settle down in or to live in or to reside in.” Notice that it is in the present tense

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which tells us that this residing of the fullness of deity in Jesus is never changing. Even now, as Jesus sits at the right had of the Father in heaven, Jesus is the fullness of deity. One of my favorite authors, Edward Payson, a most insightful preacher of the early 1800’s, captured what this statement means by saying, “If all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Jesus Christ, then in Jesus Christ alone can God be found.” [this denies ecumenism]. Payson goes on to explain, “Now if we wish to find a man who is always in one place, we must go to that place, go to his residence. It is vain to seek him or to expect to find him anywhere else. So, since the whole Godhead resides in Jesus Christ, as in a permanent habitation, we must repair to Jesus Christ, if we would find God” [The Complete Works of Edward Payson, vol. II, 360].

Beloved, the only way to know God is to know Jesus Christ because Jesus Christ is God. To know God then is not to know Jesus Christ plus some labor on my part or Christ plus some vain ritual; [I am not accepted before God because I believe in Jesus and I refrain from lying; I am accepted in the Beloved, and because of this, I strive by His power not to tell lies]; not Jesus Christ and the worship of dead saints or through the veneration of angels; and most certainly not through Jesus Christ and something I have produced. To know Jesus is to know God; and to know God is to know Jesus. To suggest that something is lacking in Jesus is to say that there is something lacking in God. And if God is God, then God cannot be lacking in anything. Indeed, as our text declares, all the deity, all the majesty, all the wonder, all the power, all the goodness, all the holiness, all the terrifying as well as all the awesome ponderings of God are found in Jesus. This is your God; this is your Jesus, see to it that no one deludes you with anything less than this about Jesus. Who do you say that Jesus is? He is the fullness of God.

B. Jesus is the fullness of humanity

For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form...(9b)

The second fundamental truth concerning Jesus that exalts Him rather than diminishes Him is that all the fullness of deity dwells...“**in bodily form.**” This is a wonder of wonders; that all that makes God God is not only found in Jesus, but is found in Jesus in bodily or physical human form. Jesus was not a charade. Jesus was not God tricking us to think He was human. God the Son took on flesh and dwelt among us. One of the false teachings that slowly began to creep into the church and of which has its beginnings even with what the Colossians were dealing with was heresy of Gnosticism; a believe that all things that were good were only or could only exist in the spiritual realm while all things bad only existed in the physical realm. For many of the people of Colossae, and much of late first and into the second and third centuries of the Roman Empire, was the belief that God could most certainly could had come down to men. This was the common teaching behind the Greek mythology they had heard for many years. But what was unacceptable to the natural mind was to suggest that all the fullness of God could dwell in the bodily form of the man named Jesus. For God to them was spiritual and good and therefore would not and could not exist in a body. And yet our very salvation from sin is built upon this very truth; this is the gospel, that Jesus is both and simultaneously God and man; full deity and full humanity. Jesus is 100% God and 100% man forever united in bodily form. Do you know that this was one of the greatest controversies of the first four centuries of the church? The orthodox teachers of the Word were constantly being bombarded with the tradition and opinion of men who said that Jesus could not be both God and man.

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But so what? That was back then and we live in the now. How does all this affect us today? How does all this show up in our lives today? I read about someone who was teaching that “Jesus was carried by Mary in the womb, but that He did not share any of her blood, as though there was a mystical transference of the sin nature in the blood. Such an idea supposes that Jesus was conceived in Mary but He was not of Mary. What the Holy Spirit produced was alien to Mary, of no part of the substance of her body. In this case, Mary was merely an incubator through which Christ passed without assuming any of her substance.” Beloved, this is not what we read either here in our text or any where in Scriptures. The point is that God has taken upon Himself our very humanity, the very substance that makes us human. Is this the testimony of Scripture? Consider Hebrews 2:17 –

Therefore, He [Jesus] had to be made like His brethren in all things [in every respect – implying that Jesus was something else prior to his being made like His brethren], so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

As one writer so aptly puts it, “How could God take upon Himself all human suffering and the penalty for sin in human experience without entering human physiology and human psychology and human spirituality? It was a human penalty He had to bear; therefore it was a human nature He had to acquire. The sin-bearer must be a true member of the race that fell” [Peter Lewis in “The Glory of Christ,” 141]. Any teaching that diminishes either the humanity or the deity of Christ; that is, anyone who says that Jesus was somehow less than God or not truly human is a false teacher. We must neither be captivated by such teaching or allow such teaching to be communicated in our presence without a reciting of the truth. And how might you know what someone really thinks about Jesus? Just ask them, “Who do you say that Jesus is?” Just ask them straight out, “Do you believe Jesus is fully God? Do you believe that Jesus is fully man?” That is what our text declares.

C. Jesus is the fullness of salvation (10a)
and in Him you have been made complete...

But this truth of Jesus being the true and full God-man may cause us to wonder why? Why must Jesus be both God and man simultaneously? We already noted from Hebrews 2:17 that the reason why is so that He might truly be what we needed for our salvation – we needed a perfect human representative. And since only God is perfect; God became the perfect man. And so in verse 10 Paul declares the next fundamental teaching concerning who is Christ saying that ***“in Him you have been made complete.”*** Or to say it another way, that in Jesus is the fullness of salvation.

At the work place and in the meeting areas for the people of Colossae were those who were teaching that the Christians were missing something in their religious experience. Again, the thought was simple; Christ is good, but Christ is not enough. If you are to experience the fullness of God, it must be Christ plus something else. How much plainer could our text be however, ***“in [Jesus] you have been made complete.”*** There is nothing else to add.

The word ***“complete”*** in verse 10 is written in such a way as to communicate Christ’s permanent and lasting work. If I might expand on the translation, it would be right to say, ***“and in***

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

Him [Jesus] you were completed in the past, are complete in the present and will be complete on into eternity.” We could also say that in Jesus you are completely complete. You brought nothing into this relationship with Christ except your sin and you will add nothing to the righteousness that Christ Himself imputed or gave to you. According to Ephesians 2:10, all the good works, all the faith, all the labors for Christ, all the worship, all the praise to God, while truly, because of God’s work in us, is our delight, our passion and our heart, is yet and at the same time exactly what God prepared in advance for us to walk or live in. Jesus made us complete. Jesus alone saved us because He is the fullness of salvation. We do not complete ourselves.

The other day I was loading up a bible program on my computer. It is a huge program, some ten disks to load. Before I put in the first disk, that computer has no idea, no inclination, no programming whatsoever to desire that bible program. But I initiated into that computer such a “desire” by loading that first disk. For every few minutes after that, I kept getting a message that said, “please load the next disk to continue”. Interestingly enough, the computer itself, while now wanting to continue and complete the process was unable to do so unless I completed the process by putting in the next disk. I realize that the analogy is not perfect as computers and people are vastly different, but the point is that I predetermined the path for that computer and then upon initiating that path, the computer “desired” to continue on that path but only did so as I completed my work in it. Beloved, Jesus has made you complete by His coming, by His dying on the cross for your sins, by sending His Spirit to convict you of sin, of righteousness and of judgment, by His opening your eyes to behold what He started in you and promising that what He started, He Himself has and will complete.

This does not mean that we have no desire or heart to believe and follow Him. This does not mean we do not need to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. It means that everything we need to do such things has been secured, provided, guided and completed by Jesus Christ. As one preacher puts it, “...in union with Jesus Christ our every spiritual need is fully met. Possessing Him we possess all. There is no need, therefore, for the Christian to turn to any other source for spiritual help” [Curtis Vaughan, 73].

Can I give you a very loose but pointed paraphrase of Paul’s statement, “and in Him you have been made complete”? Here it is, let me put it simply: “You cannot do any better than Jesus.” If you entertain the ideas or notions that it is Jesus plus what I do; it is Jesus plus my worship; it is Jesus plus my labors; it is Jesus plus speaking in tongues, or keeping the law - then you are diminishing Jesus. There is no experience, no philosophy, no religion, no other pursuit that can meet the great need that is found in Jesus alone.

And there is no other place where this idea of Christ alone is played out more fully than in our salvation. If you are in union with Christ who is the fullness of deity in bodily form, then drink from this fullness. Find the deepest satisfaction of your soul in Him. What is your need this day? Do you need mercy for forgiveness of sins? Then find it in the fullness of Christ through faith in Him. Do you need strength to resist the temptations of sin? Then drink from the fullness of Christ’s sufficiency to find that strength. Is your heart in anguish over the hardships of life? Then seek out Christ in whom all the fullness dwells and receive the comfort that would revive your soul. Is this not the heart of Jesus toward us who said in Matthew 11:28, “**Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.**” I love the way Spurgeon put it saying,

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You trust in Jesus, and only in Jesus, for your salvation, then why are you troubled? “Because of my great care.” Is it not written, “Cast thy burden upon the Lord?” “Be careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication make known your wants unto God.” Cannot you trust [Jesus] for temporals? “Ah! I wish I could.” If you cannot trust [Jesus] for temporals, how dare you trust Him for spirituals? Can you trust Him for your soul's redemption, and not rely upon Him for a few lesser mercies? Is not [Jesus] enough for thy need, or is His all-sufficiency too narrow for thy wants? Dost thou want another eye beside that of Him who sees every secret thing? Is His heart faint? Is His arm weary? If so, seek another God; but if He be infinite, omnipotent, faithful, true, and all-wise, why [goest] thou abroad so much to seek another confidence? Why dost thou rake the earth to find another foundation, when this is strong enough to bear all the weight which thou canst ever build thereon? Christian, mix not thy wine with water, do not alloy thy gold of faith with the dross of human confidence. Wait thou only upon [Jesus], and let thine expectation be from Him.

So, when someone asks you “Who do you say Jesus is?” your response ought to be, “He is my only confidence, my only hope; my only Savior; my only God; my only expectation; my only salvation!”

D. Jesus is the fullness of authority (10b) *and He is the head over all rule and authority...*

This brings us to our final fundamental truth concerning Jesus Christ. When Paul wanted to encourage the Colossians to higher views of Christ, he was sure to include a statement about Jesus' possessing the fullness of authority saying “**and He is the head over all rule and authority.**”

You see, there was a lot of talk around Colossae about angels and other spiritual creatures. Some of the false teachers even claimed that their visions were from angels and through visions (2:18). Why would they appeal to angels or other spiritual creatures to validate their teaching? Because for them, Christ was not enough. Where is the authority? Is it found in angels, visions, the church, the teachings of men? No, Jesus truly and only is “the head over all rule and authority.” When Paul says, “all rule and authority” he is not merely speaking of governments or employers. This is a term that includes the spiritual realm. If you look back at Colossians 1:16 you find this very thing having already been stated, that Jesus is before all thrones, dominions, rulers and authority, whether in the heavens or on the earth. So Paul is concerned that some might get wrapped up with either angels or with demons and quickly reminds his readers that everything is to come back to Christ and His rule.

Why is this important? I am amazed at how many people I can talk to that seem to be more interested in the subject of angels rather than in the subject of Christ. Don't get me wrong, I find angels to be fascinating and awesome creatures. But given a choice between exalting the person and nature of Christ and dwelling on angels, Christ must win. If you find yourself being preoccupied with angels, or demons, or to apply the principle further, if you find yourself so preoccupied with end times teaching, or with signs and wonders, or with anything that robs you of looking to the rulership of Christ, then rid yourself of it. The point again is simply this, trust only in Jesus in whom all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form and in whom alone you are completely complete and in whom alone is all rule and authority. Let us head the testimony of

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Heaven itself, for it was the voice of God the Father who said to the awestruck disciples in Matthew 17:5 –

This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!

It is my prayer, my desire, my passion that both you and I find Jesus to be our all in all; to know Him and to speak of Him as being are only supreme and sufficient Lord and Savior. Have you come to this point? Or have you thoughts been fashioned or tainted by the traditions of men. Do you believe what you believe about Jesus and His Word because its what your parents taught you; because it is what your past church tradition has taught you; or because you think some angel told you; or even worse; because it just seems right to you? We are directed, commanded, exhorted and pleaded with to know Jesus, but to know Him through and by His Word. Our every thought; our every belief; our every word about Jesus is to be governed by His Word. And from the Word we find Jesus to be the fullness of God, the fullness of man; the fullness of salvation and fullness of authority. Let us be satisfied in Him and Him alone and continual drink then from the well of the knowledge of Christ. For Jesus is the mighty God, the perfect man, the only Savior, the eternal King, and Lord of lords. God-called teachers will not preach an imaginary Jesus who appeals to the flesh, but rather the true Christ of creation and salvation. Is this who you say that Jesus is?

Soli Deo Gloria

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