

# 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 2:11-12

*How Do You Identify With Christ?*

Turn with me to the book of Acts, Acts 4 and as you turn there let me give you a bit of the background. The apostles Peter and John had been arrested for **“teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead”** (4:2) and when questioned by the high-priest as to what authority they were preaching Jesus, Peter answers them with those familiar words, **“and there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven [that is no other authority and no other means] that has been given among men by which we must be saved”** (4:12).

But then notice with me what is said about Peter and John in the next verse; **“Now as they [the religious leaders] observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men [not seminary graduates], they were amazed [why?] and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.**

Please consider that last statement, that they **“began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.”** Oh that this would be the testimony of we who profess to be God’s people, that others, both believers and unbelievers, would have the knowledge that we have been with Jesus. Listen to the exhortation of Spurgeon who commented on this phrase saying;

*A Christian should be a striking likeness of Jesus Christ. You have read lives of Christ, beautifully and eloquently written, but the best life of Christ is His living biography, written out in the words and actions of His people. If we were what we profess to be, and what we should be, we should be pictures of Christ; yea, such striking likenesses of Him, that the world would not have to hold us up by the hour together, and say, "Well, it seems somewhat of a likeness;" but they would, when they once beheld us, exclaim, "He has been with Jesus; he has been taught of Him; he is like Him; he has caught the very idea of the holy Man of Nazareth, and he works it out in his life and every-day actions."*

Oh beloved, do you desire this to be true of you? I know I do. To long to have others so see Jesus in me that they fail to see me at all. But how do we so identify ourselves with Jesus, that such a testimony as that of what Spurgeon spoke could be true of us? Or more importantly that we might rightly hold the title of Acts 4:13 that we have been with Jesus?

Let us turn now to our text in Colossians 2:11-12, where we see Paul reminding his readers that there has been such an inward change wrought in the heart of the believer that it cannot help but to manifest itself in a daily newness of life; a life governed, patterned, and directed by the life of Christ at work in us. In other words, to be in union with Christ, to dwell in Christ, to walk with Christ, to be in a “personal” relationship with Christ – to use these kinds of phraseologies – must be more than mere words that drip off our lips like some madman’s drool (I say that these would be better to be descriptions that others give to us) – but rather these must be so real of expressions of the supernatural working of Jesus in us that when we say them, even if we must say them at all, people cannot help but to recognize that we have been with Jesus; we are united with Jesus; we are one with Jesus. Let us read our text in Colossians 2:11-12:

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**11 and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.**

The problem that Paul is addressing for his readers in the text and the problem that we too can struggle with, is that we can tend to copy or mimic the outward expressions of union with Christ; of being in a right relationship with Christ and think that so long as “we” do them or that we see being done in others, that this means we have truly had our hearts changed by Jesus. By way of example, can a person come to church and even enjoy being at church and be faithful to a church and yet attend week after week, month after month or even year after year and yet not have his heart changed? Yes. Can a person read his or her Bible regularly and yet be an unbeliever? Yes. Can a person be a leader in a church and do good things for others in his position and yet be unsaved? Absolutely. And now to borrow from Paul’s example in our text, can a person be “circumcised” outwardly and even baptized outwardly and yet be unchanged inwardly by God? Yes. You see, when we look at the things we do outwardly as things by which we merit our standing, by which we deserve our position, by which we have earned our right before God; then we have failed to maintain the highest view of Christ, that He alone is supreme and sufficient for our salvation.

And isn’t it hard because the very works which are supposed to be the fruits or evidences of our salvation can become the very thorns by which we suppose by our doing them, keeps us in right relationship with Christ. Let me explain what I mean this way. The difference is if we think, “*If I don’t read my Bible, if I don’t go to church; if I commit this particular sin, then I am doomed.*” We can start to think that our standing with God is based upon what we do or don’t do rather than upon what Christ has already done. It is so subtle, because every believer will do those good works with God has prepared in advance that we walk in them (Ephesians 2:10); but the difference is that for the believer, the thought ought to be; “*I thank the Lord Jesus for what He has done on the cross to forgive my sins and to make me new in Him and to present me before God as holy and blameless in His sight*” – and then my friends, everything else begins to flow out of that, the desire to read the word (the desire, not just the duty), the desire to be in fellowship, the desire to proclaim the gospel. These are not to be humanly manufactured works by which we make ourselves more presentable to God, but rather are the inevitable outworkings of the grace of God upon our hearts. Can you see the difference? One perceives the means of grace (Bible reading, prayer, etc) as the things I must do to prove to God, to others and myself that I am saved while the other sees the means of grace as nothing more than the extraordinary outworking of the Spirit of Christ upon a heart that delights in its union with Christ. The difference is between a “*having to*” mentality and a “*longing to*” mentality. Which best describes your general attitude? And ultimately, the difference is between those who will be seen as simply going through religious motions and those who will be (as we read in Acts 4:13) recognized as having been with Jesus.

Now, back to our text and working to segue into what all this has to do with the words of Colossians 2:11-12, we are presented in our text with Paul’s concern over the issues of circumcision and baptism. The teaching that was prevalent in Colossae at the time was that being physically circumcised was a necessary work in order to be in right standing with God. It is interesting to note that while Paul does mention baptism in this text, the context is not how the

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Old Testament rite of circumcision, the physical removing of flesh, has been replaced by the New Testament rite of baptism; which is an outward identification of the believer with Christ. The context is this, that *what has happened to you on the inside by the working of God is your identification with Christ*. No outward symbol in and of itself, be it circumcision or baptism, is to be your hope of eternal life. It is not because a Jew was circumcised in the flesh, nor is it because a believer has been baptized with water that makes one saved. It is not the reading of the Bible, the praying of prayers, the attending of church; but rather this, do you know and are you certain that Christ has wrought a change in your heart? Not all who are baptized in Jesus' name are born again, that is saved. But all who are born again are saved and will delight in obeying Jesus' command, beginning with being baptized. For Paul the concern was something along the lines of, “Not all who are circumcised physically are saved; but all who are circumcised spiritually are saved!”

So the question is not about what I have done but rather do I know what God has done for me? And one of the ways in which I know that God has done His work in me, is that others begin to recognize that I have been with Jesus; that He is my delight, my joy, and my song.

So, let us look at this text and see how dependence on physical circumcision for the Jews and those who wanted Christians to act like Jews, or dependence upon baptism as a guarantee to eternal life; or dependence upon any such work of the flesh falls short of the grace of God as such a dependence means there is a greater lacking in one's trust or dependence upon Christ alone.

## I. Circumcision by Christ (2:11)

*and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.*

Let us begin by noting that Paul wants to clarify this issue of circumcision for the Colossians. The false teachers were seeking to dupe believers concerning the sufficiency of Christ. As we have been noting, the false teachers wanted to add something to Christ. What are you adding to Jesus today? But Paul here reminds his readers of the excellence of their union with Jesus Christ so that they might press on with joy in their living out Christ in their lives.

Let us not forget that one of the great false teachings the early church contended with was from a group known to us as the Judaizers. The Judaizers emphasized that the physical rite of circumcision was necessary for being justified before God; of being right with God. Many of the Christians at Colossae were Jewish and therefore had been circumcised, while others were not Jewish and had not been. Should non-Jewish believers be circumcised just because Jesus was Jewish and in order to keep the Law? Paul would contend in our verse that the every Christian is circumcised, but not with a circumcision made with hands. It was a spiritual circumcision wrought in the heart by Christ Himself. What are the causes of this spiritual circumcision? There are two in our text.

### A. *The believer's circumcision is the result of his union with Christ (11a)*

First, the spiritual circumcision of every believer is the result of one's union with Christ. As Paul reminded the believers in verse 10 that there was nothing they could add to what Christ has done, notice as well the emphasis upon the believers union with Christ. Beginning in verse 9, note the repetition of the phrase, “in Him” – that is “in Christ”. This is a reference to one's

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relationship to Jesus. You can only be “in Him” or not “in Him”. We read in verse 10, **“and in Him you have been made complete...”** and now in verse 11 we read **“and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands...”** What does the “in Him” mean? Well, we see back in verse 9 exactly what this means reading, **“For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.”** The “in Him” speaks of the person of Christ, the totality of His being. As we saw from Colossians 2:9, the whole of the Godhead, everything that makes God God is found in Jesus. All of God and all of man are united in the person of Christ.

And the point then of verse 11 is that “in Jesus” alone, the believer, through faith in Christ, is united with Him in His saving work. In the Old Testament, all Jewish males were united nationalistically to Israel through circumcision. For the believer, he is united to God, not some nation, by faith. So then, “in Him” in coming to Him and Him alone; depending on Him and Him alone; in Jesus, verse 10 says, we you have been made complete; nothing can be added to what He has accomplished for you on the cross

With this same emphasis we read now in verse 11 **“and in Him you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands...by the circumcision of Christ.”** Beloved, there is no second blessing, no other work that the believer contributes to salvation. Even as physical circumcision was once performed, so too is spiritual circumcision once performed. When you entered into your relationship with Christ, Christ did all that was needed to put you into right standing with God and to keep you in right standing with God. This truth is summed up nicely in the words of Horiatias Bonar who penned:

Not what my hands have done; can save my guilty soul  
Not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole  
Not what I say or do, can give me peace with God  
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears can bear my awful load.

Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin;  
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within.  
Thy love to me, O God, not mine, O Lord, to Thee,  
Can rid me of this dark unrest, And set my spirit free.

Are you in union with Christ? Are you and He one? Does your heart and spirit truly testify within you that radical changes from darkness to light; from death to life; from the sin of self to the righteousness of the Redeemer is at work in you.

### *B. The believer’s circumcision is the result of a different agent (11b)*

The second aspect of the believer’s spiritual circumcision is that it is the result of a different agent. In the Old Testament, it was the priest that officiated in the Jewish rite of circumcision. The point is that another man was needed to authenticate a person’s entrance into Judaism. What we find in our text however is that the authentication of the believer’s entrance into union with Christ is done **“with a circumcision made without hands.”** We read that this circumcision is wrought by Christ Himself by means of an internal working. In other words, there is no outward ritual by which one improves his standing with God. What establishes our standing with God is an unseen work in the heart where Christ Himself removes **“the body of the flesh.”** Our old man,

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our old desires to follow sin and our previous and natural inclination to live in rebellion against God has been cut away, cut off, circumcised by Christ in the divine act we call regeneration. The Scriptures constantly remind us that all the external works of men, whether performed upon ourselves or upon others, is impotent to change the inclinations and desires of the heart. It is Christ alone who changes hearts of stone to hearts of flesh; from hostile rebels to humble servants who delight in God and His Word. The question is simply this, have you so identified with Christ, are you finding yourself so desirous wrapped up and preoccupied with Him that you just long to be with Him in His Word, to be with Him in prayer, and to be with Him in fellowship with His people. Beloved, this is circumcision of the heart and all the other graces just flow out of this. The outward physical act of circumcision, which simply was a foreshadowing of the spiritual circumcision to come by Christ, had no power to save. Indeed, when Jewish parents brought a son to be circumcised, it was their hope that their son would be set apart to follow the Lord. Yet the truth is that the Old Testament is littered with circumcised males who were apostates. Circumcision was no guarantee of future righteousness but rather merely identified them with the nation of Israel. It could not and did not change their hearts. In contrast to this, the circumcision **“made without hands,”** always changes the heart; and therefore always results God’s producing spiritual fruit within and without. What I am trying to say is this, the fruits or evidences of God’s working in a person are not to be pursued as the proof of salvation (not, “I have to do these to prove that I am saved) but rather the fruits (the good works) are simply the product or the result of salvation. An apple tree produces apples not because it pursues, attempts, or tries to prove it is an apple tree; it produces apples because that’s what apple trees do; that is the nature of the tree; it is the result of being an apple tree. The circumcision of Christ upon our hearts, cuts away the old nature and gives us a new nature, makes us a new creature in Christ and the results are, according Colossians 1:10 is that we are bearing fruit in every good work. Is this how you identify with Christ. If Christ is your tree, then you should look like Him and when others see your fruit and even when you see your fruit, everyone will know that you have been with Jesus.

As we have seen, Paul is talking about a spiritual circumcision, one **“made without hands;”** and therefore inward rather than outward. When we come back to this text, we will take up the issue of being baptized in Christ. But let me ask you a question based upon what we have already looked at. When considering this spiritual circumcision that Paul is clearly referring to, what would be the corresponding Old Testament shadow? It is clear that the Old Testament shadow is the external, physical circumcision as practiced according to the Law of God. There is no way around this. Contrary to what so many think, baptism is not the direct New Testament counterpart to Old Testament circumcision. We will see in verse 12 that baptism is linked here to circumcision, but it is not connected with the old practice of physical circumcision but rather to this New Testament spiritual circumcision. And don’t miss the point Paul is making; do not allow yourself to believe that any rite, or ceremony, or action on your part or done to you by human hands is what saves you.

Let me walk you through the comparisons between this old circumcision of the flesh and the new circumcision of the heart:

- The old is external, while the new is internal.

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- The old is nationalistic in covenant with the nation, while the new is individual in union with Christ.
- The old affects the body as a cutting away of the foreskin, while the new affects the heart in the removal of the body of flesh.
- The old requires an officiator in a priest, the new is done without hands as a divine act.
- The old is limited to males, the new is limited only to those who believe, male and female.
- The old is a human act, the new is a divine act.
- The old has temporal results that cannot change the heart, the new is the regenerative work of the Spirit making a person alive in Christ.
- The old is a ritual that cannot impart life, while the new applies the death and resurrection in all its power to give a new standing with God.
- The old secures nothing eternal, while the new secures forgiveness of sins and eternity with Christ.
- The old was applied due to family heritage, while the new is applied only through faith in Christ.

In our text, Paul is speaking to and about believers. Never forget that this is all about what Christ has done both for the redeemed and in the redeemed. Notice that everything we are speaking about is in the past tense as verse 10 says, **“in Him you have been made complete...”** and now in verse 11 he wrote, **“in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands...”** and when we get to verse 12 we will again note the work that has already been done when he wrote, **“you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God...”** and even note what he wrote in verse 13, still in the past tense saying, **“you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.”** The point is - this is all Christ's doing. It is what He does to the heart and then, as we will pick up in a couple of weeks, one of the “pictures” and practices of born again people is to be baptized in Christ; to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord; not as some mere duty or ritual by which to secure salvation, but rather as a delight of the heart because of the changes Jesus is bringing inside. Baptism then is not a picture of the Old Covenant circumcision, but of New Covenant circumcision or regeneration. The cutting away and removal of a nature, a body of flesh that is hostile and indifferent to God and the giving of a heart that longs to love, live for and serve God. Have you experienced this kind of freedom; this kind of longing; this kind of passion for Jesus? If not, why? What is keeping you from coming to embrace the fullness of God in Christ? Is it not your sinful pride; your thinking that you're okay on your own or with just a little bit of Christ? Receive the fullness of Christ, call upon the name of the Lord and be saved; submitting to His Lordship and

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asking Him to work in you the **“walking 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 1:10).

As we close, let me make just a few practical observations by which we may be either inadvertently or even intentionally viewing Christ as nothing more than an addition to our lives rather than being our lives. If these things are true of us in part or in whole, they will cause the world to hold us up and say, **“Well, it seems somewhat of a likeness” to Christ.** So consider:

- When we read our Bible’s or pray because we “have to” rather than out of a desire and delightfully wanting to then such efforts are nothing more than outward works by which we are trying to add to what Christ has done in the hopes that God accepts it.
- When we are more concerned about offending our spouses, our parents, our children, or our friends rather than God then Christ is but an addition to our lives.
- When we labor harder to please our spouses, our parents, our children, or our friends rather than God, then Christ is but an addition to our lives.
- When talking to others about Christ and sharing the gospel is regarded in our hearts as an “optional” good work rather than the optimal mission to which we have been called, then Christ is but an addition to our lives. (Matthew 28:19-20).
- When fellowship with the saints (being intentional to spend time with other believers for the purpose of encouraging one another in the things of God) is regularly self-limited; self-regulated; and self-motivated so as to best accommodate your own schedules and preferences rather than being gracious, liberal, hospitable, God-centered, God-focused and Church-edifying; then Christ is nothing more to us than an often inconvenient addition to our lives.

If these are true of us in part or in whole, then we are simply “hoping” or wishing that whatever we do happen to offer God, be it with regard to fellowship or any of the things mentioned, will be considered by God as “enough.” “Enough” for what?

Or the attitude can be, “Hey, I am saved by grace so I really don’t have to worry about or do anything else!” That is correct, you don’t have to; but the circumcised heart knows no other course. Listen to how the Lord describes this circumcision of the heart that He promised Israel in Ezekiel 36:26-27 –

**“Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”**

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And then in Psalm 40:6-8 we read:

***Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; my ears you have opened [David coming to the realization that it's not just the external]; burnt offering and sin offering You have not required. Then I said, “Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart.”***

Notice the progression; a new heart is given; the old heart is removed, circumcised by the work of God; into this new heart is pour the Spirit of God and with His indwelling, we are not caused to walk and to observe God's will and all of this is our delight to do! And so beloved, to answer the question, How are we to identify with Christ? I answer, “*We identify with Christ through faith in that He has circumcised our hearts and that with Him we buried our sinful selves in the grave and have been raised up with Christ to live our lives to the glory of God.*”

May the testimony and the prayer of each of us parallel that of the apostle Paul who said, “***for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...***” (Philippians 3:3). For when we do these things, I believe we move from going through the simply religious motions that no one else cares about to those who are recognized as having been with Jesus!

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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