

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 2:16-23

Keeping an Undiminished View of Christ (Part 1)

Colossians 2:16-19

16 Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day — 17 things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. 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, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

One of the most intriguing aspects of God’s choosing the nation of Israel in the Old Testament was the call for them to be a distinct, a morally, ethically, and spiritually distinct people. They, as the people of God, were to be different; demonstrably unique in behavior and in worship and in fact everything they did. That as they entered into the promised land and became a nation and even a kingdom, that rather than being influenced by the world around them, God’s purpose for them was that they would be the influence upon the nations. As we will see this morning, **God intends for His people to be distinct and unswayed by the religious and behavioral practices of the world. God does not want His people being influenced and behaving like the world.**

Let us walk through some passages in the book of Deuteronomy that illustrate this intention of God for His people to be distinct and unswayed by the world around them. We look first at Deuteronomy 7:1-8:

7 When the Lord your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, 2 and when the Lord your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. 3 Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. 4 For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you. 5 But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their sacred pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire. 6 For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. 7 The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

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Now turn with me to Deuteronomy 8:11-20:

11 Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today; 12 otherwise, when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built good houses and lived in them, 13 and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiplies, 14 then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.. 15 He led you through the great and terrible wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water; He brought water for you out of the rock of flint. 16 In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end. 17 Otherwise, you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.' 18 But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. 19 It shall come about if you ever forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I testify against you today that you will surely perish. [it is bad news for you to be influenced by the ways and the practices of this world].20 Like the nations that the Lord makes to perish before you, so you shall perish; because you would not listen to the voice of the Lord your God.

Now let us look a few chapters over to Deuteronomy 12:1-4:

12 These are the statutes and the judgments which you shall carefully observe in the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess as long as you live on the earth. 2 You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. 3 You shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place. 4 You shall not act like this toward the Lord your God.

And finally, in a very encapsulated expression of how God intends for His people to live, let us look at Deuteronomy 18:9:

When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations.

Let me state the principle again: *God intends for His people to be distinct and unswayed by the religious and behavioral practices of the world. God does not want His people being influenced and behaving like the world.*

God knows that His people cannot be distinct, and cannot be holy, and therefore cannot bear proper witness to the greatness of God, if they have the influences and bring in the practices of the world around them. The point of the verses we have been reading is this; if you see worldly influences or worldly practices inside the congregation, destroy them.

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This is all apparently true for ancient Israel. But the question for us is this; does God have the same intention for the church? Does God expect those who profess to know and follow Christ to be every bit as intentional and distinctive as He intended for Israel? What do you suppose the answer is? Yes, God has the same intention, the same purpose for the church, for you and for me who know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The apostle Peter captured this by borrowing from the very passages we read in the Old Testament and applied them to the Church. Look with me at 1 Peter 2:9-12 where we see this borne out:

9 But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY. 11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. 12 Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

So, let me state the principle again: *God intends for His people to be distinct and unswayed by the religious and behavioral practices of the world. God does not want His people being influenced and behaving like the world.*

Now then, what does all this have to do with our text in Colossians 2? Let us turn to Colossians 2:16-23 and as we do, let me tell you that we find Paul for the first time specifically addressing the fundamental problems facing the church there. Every church has its problems and its pressures. For the Colossians it was a form of teaching that was circulating around the city. Some refer to what Paul speaks of in these verses as the “Colossians Heresy” – that is the false teaching that was circulating in that city and region that was at odds with the gospel; at odds with the teachings of Christ. I have sought to avoid getting too deep into this teaching because on the surface it may sound rather wild, intensely philosophical, and outrageous and totally disconnected from anything of relevance to us. If I were to talk to you about the worship of the Old Testament god of Molech, how those who worshipped this false God offered their small children to him via a statue with arms held out over a fire to burn up their children in an attempt to appease him, you would say, “That is far out there!” I don’t know that I am aware of any Molech worship centers in the United States and I would have to say that none of you have ever considered worshipping any god in this fashion.

But the false teaching that was circulating around Colossae and Laodicea and this area of Asia Minor, while seemingly out there, is far more prevalent and disturbingly present in our culture than you might be aware of. And ultimately then, the exhortation of Paul in Colossians 2:8 becomes much more practical and important for us today than we might imagine. What was this exhortation?

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.

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In other words, do not allow yourselves to be influenced and swayed by the religious thinking and practices of those outside the church, outside of Christ; those whom Paul described in verse 19 as **“not holding fast [or clinging] to the head [that is Jesus]... We, in verse 16 of our text, see Paul telling these believers not to let such people “judge” them and in verse 18 not to let such people “defraud” or disqualify them. I believe this issue of not allowing the world to be our judge, our jury, our influence and our guide to right worship and practice concerning Jesus is so important and has such a bearing on our daily lives that I want to camp out here and explain to you what it was that these believers faced in Colossae and then relate that to your own everyday experience. Beloved, we are not to tolerate, we are to give in to; we are not to compromise; we are not to be influenced by diminished thinking concerning Jesus Christ and yet, as we will see this is exactly what the world, both religious and secular is attempting to do. We are to be bold and unashamed in our proclamation of the truths of the gospel; yet those whose teaching is influenced by philosophy, the traditions of men and even by demonic influences will do everything to intimidate you and me against such boldness.**

So this morning I hope you will find it both interesting and edifying to understand this Colossian Heresy and will come to see that what this church at Colossae fought against is the same thing you and I must fight against. *For at the root of all heresies is the entertaining of a lower view of Christ* than what is presented in the Scripture. And do not forget that the key point of Paul up to this point in the letter has been what? The absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as God and as Savior. In the verses we just looked at in Colossians 2:8-15, we have seen both these truths married together, that in Jesus all the fullness of the Deity, of God dwells in bodily form (2:9) and that we are complete in Him because in His death on the cross for our sins; we died to our sins; in His burial in the grave for our sins; our sins are buried and we bear them no more; and in His resurrection to life toward God; we find our new life and now live to God.

“Therefore,” says Paul in verse 16, in light of the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ; because you regard Jesus as the highest Lord; because you regard Him as the total Savior; do not, do not let the world influence you and sway you from being Christ-centered; trusting in Christ alone.

If we are to understand the false teaching that concerned Paul, we must explain it a bit. One of the practices of the religious or spiritually minded people at the time of Paul was to combine the elements of various beliefs or practices into one so-called improved “hybrid” religion. This new religion or belief system would allegedly and persuasively promise to improve the host religion.

To this end, a number of influential people in Colossae looked at the Christianity being preached; they listened to the gospel and then arrogantly taught that it could be improved and that if the Christians would follow their additions, they could have a deeper and more real spiritual experience. What they and so many people fail to realize is that Christ plus anything else never results in an improved view of Jesus, but rather a diminished view of Him.

There is a technical term we use to describe this blending of religious beliefs and practices. It is called syncretism – the attempt to make various beliefs all blend into one new system of belief. The problem that the false teachers of Colossae were attempting to “correct” was the exclusivity of Christianity. They did not have a problem with Jesus per say; except when the Christian’s taught that it was Christ-alone who saves; except when the Christians quoted

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Jesus’ own statement, **“I am the way, the truth, and they life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.”** (John 14:6). Such thinking disgusted the sensibilities of those in Asia Minor and in Colossae. These teachers thought and taught that there was some truth in all the religions. Sound familiar – all roads lead to God? In Judaism; they had some good teachings on eating and drinking and the celebration of holy days. In Paganism, there was some truth for they knew how to really have a religious experience with all their dancing and ecstatic speech and such. In Secularism; the practice just being a good person apart from any god. And now, in Christianity, with its emphasis upon good deeds and morality. These teachers sought to blend what they thought were the best elements of all these teachings to come up with what we might call a “Super-Christianity”.

But beloved, when such blending of various beliefs was being imposed upon the believers at Colossae, as Paul learned that the believers there were hearing such teaching, what did he say? He said, **“do not let anyone kidnap you from the truth!”** I believe that Colossians 2:8-23 is nothing short of a call to Christ-centered boldness. Paul is calling the believers not simply to be dogmatic; but bull-dogmatic in this regard. **“Do not let anyone act as your judge; do not let anyone act as your umpire and make you think you are disqualified because you hold to; you believe in Christ-alone.”** The imperatives; the commands of verses 8, 16, and 18 are calling believers not to listen to or be influenced by those outside of true, biblical Christianity; allowing them to tell you what your Christianity is to look like.

And before we get into these verses, let me give you an example of how we see this very thing in the church today using a very recent and graphic example. For years now the church has been told from those on the outside that homosexuality ought to be accepted behavior even in the church. Beginning in some of the mainline churches, we have seen churches cave in to this thinking. And now, even in evangelicalism, we are seeing it. Just a couple of weeks ago a prominent Christian singer “came out” declaring herself to be a homosexual and of having lived with her partner for the past eight years. In addition to this, she is justifying this pattern of sinful behavior judging 2000 years of Church scholarship and 4000 years of Jewish tradition and understanding by saying that because of a few recent scholars calling into question the interpretations of the texts that forbid homosexual behavior; this alone justifies, this make her way of life okay as a Christian.

When we confront such thinking we are asked, “Well, are we not all sinners?” We say, “Yes” to which the next questions seems to baffle so many believers, “Well then who are you to judge me? If you sin then who are you to say that may sin is any worse than yours. If you sin, then why are you still parading around as some saint, and enjoying some ministry?” Beloved, this is the world’s thinking because they don’t understand the point. The point is not that homosexuality is a worse sin than others or that other believers do not struggle with sin. The issue here is one of repentance. The believer looks at what God calls sin and then agrees with that and then pleads for the grace and mercy to have victory over that sin. The believer knows the truth of Titus 2:11-12 -

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires [lusts] and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age...

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So the call here is not to justify sinful behavior by saying other people also sin; but rather to say I want to deny sin, I want to live a life according to God’s standards and even if I may fail, I do not want the patterns of sin to characterize me. I want to be known as a follower of Christ, not a follower of a particular sin. Again, we are warned most intensely in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 -

9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.

In other words, those who live in, practice, continue in and are unrepentant of such behavior; it does not matter whether its homosexuality, or the covetous; it does not matter whether it is being a murder or a liar; a deceitful sneak or an angry person; if you are unchanged, and unrepentant; then you will not inherit the kingdom of God. But listen to what Paul said next to the Corinthians in 6:11

11 Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

These had repented of these sins. These recognized that such things were not acceptable to God and that while some of these behaviors may have been acceptable to the world, there is no teaching available by which Christ plus any of these things could ever be considered right.

Let us never forget then the basic premise of the verses we will be studying next week; that premise again being this - *God intends for His people to be distinct and unswayed by the religious and behavioral practices of the world. God does not want His people being influenced and behaving like the world.*

And so, it is not to be Christianity plus psychology; it is not to be Christianity plus or conditioned by secular scientific theory; it is not to be Christianity plus political correctness. When you stop to consider even just these three worldly philosophies and their effect upon Christianity the obvious conclusion is that the each, in their own respective ways, undermines the truthfulness and authority of God’s Word. Even Christian psychology of which the church survived without for almost 1900 years, undermines sound biblical precepts. Beloved, I stand on the premise that the Bible alone provides the essential answers for every mental, emotional, and spiritual problem. Modern scientific theories undermine the very opening chapters of Genesis calling into question the origin of sin and death and therefore undermine the need of Jesus as Savior. And even our current political climate calls everyone to be tolerant of every other idea, teaching and belief with the exception of Christianity.

As we spend time then looking at what the Colossians were dealing with; these Christ-diminishing teachings; let us see our own call in these verses not simply to be dogmatic; but bulldogmatic and cry out with 1 Corinthians 9:16, “for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” of Jesus Christ.

How do you know if you are keeping yourself unswayed by the influences and practices of the world. Let me give you just a few characteristics of those who so keep themselves; who are not being kidnapped by the philosophies and preferences of this world and who are not allowing their practice of looking to Christ alone to be influenced by the judgment of those outside the church. This is not an exhaustive list; but it will get us started in our thinking. What makes genuine believers distinct from the world?

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1. They obey the words of Christ. They daily practice, [seeking] first [God’s] kingdom and His righteous (Matthew 6:33). It is these who demonstrate with their priorities that they do not love the world nor the things in the world” because they know that to love the things of this world indicates that the love of the Father is not in them (1 John 2:15). Can you say honestly to yourself, I am truly seeking God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness? In whatever you thing you may question that, this would be an area that you are perhaps being influenced by the world. Repent, forsake that pursuit and follow Christ.
2. They see holiness of life as a worthy objective. While we know that we will never fully attain to perfect Christ-like holiness, those who are being influenced less and less by the world are in continual pursuit of Christ’s holiness. They, like Paul, **“press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 3:14). In what things do you regard yourself as having given up on this upward call of God? In such things you may find you are being influenced by the world.
3. They see their bodies as the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 we read, **“19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20 For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”** In other words, those who are the distinct people of God are concerned that they not defile their bodies or expose, attire or decorate them as if they were the possession of anyone else but God because they have been purchased by Christ’s death on the cross. Do you give thought to what you will wear, how you will look, what you are doing, what you are listening to or watching and ask yourself, “Does this bring glory to God?” In whatever area you find this not to be true, then you perhaps are being swayed and influenced by the world.

These are just a few thoughts, but let us prayerfully consider the principle that *God intends for His people to be distinct and unswayed by the religious and behavioral practices of the world. God does not want His people being influenced and behaving like the world.* How are we doing? What needs to be forsaken today? May we sing with the hymn writer:

May the mind of Christ, my Savior,
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.

Soli Deo Gloria

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