

# 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 2) – 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.**

Let me begin with a statement you need to hear and embrace: You will never outgrow your need for the gospel. There will never be a time in your life that you have heard the gospel enough. The fundamental truth of the matter is this, that both unbeliever and believer alike need to constantly hear the life changing truths of the gospel.

We see this truth, that even believers need to hear the gospel, repeated in the Scriptures but perhaps best encapsulated in the word Paul penned to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 we read the words:

**1 Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. [And what is the gospel in seed form?] 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures [we are sinners and need to be saved – according to the revelation of the word of God], 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures [according to the revelation of God; to newness of life; of a life lived to and for God]...**

We need to hear the gospel. For those of you here this morning who have yet to have your hearts warmed by the fire of the gospel, who have yet to embrace its life-changing message of forgiveness of sins in Jesus as Savior and of following Him as your only true Lord; you need to hear the gospel again and again. And for those who have had the life-giving message transform you, change you, and cause your heart to beat with a pulse only for God, you too need to hear the gospel.

Why, why do we need to hear the gospel, particularly those of us who have experienced its life-changing power? We need to hear the gospel because of what we considered last week from our text in Colossians 2:16-23; namely that from these verses we learn 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.** Let me remind you of the gospel as recorded in Colossians 2:9-14 that says:

**9 For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, [Jesus is God] 10 and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; [Jesus is Lord] 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**

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**working of God, who raised Him from the dead. 13 When 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, 14 having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross [Jesus is Savior].**

We need to hear such a message because the influences of the world will seek to sway us and move us away from an unadulterated understanding of the gospel. The world wants to maintain and wants us to maintain a high-view of man, a low-view of God and Jesus, and an even lower view of His Word to us. The world wants to marginalize God, God's Word and God's people. The world wants you to be like them, but God wants you to be like Jesus. We see in the world a greater and greater tolerance of sin; of excusing and explaining away horrific, society harming sins as being nothing more than problems or the sad result of a poor environment. I guess I do agree, that all sin is the result of a poor environment, one of our own making because, even from the lips of our Savior, we learn from John 3:19-20:

**19 This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.**

And so, we are seeing more and more corruption around us and yet nothing being done. We see the embracing of sins that were once the greatest cause of embarrassment. We are increasingly become the culture against which the Lord chastises in Isaiah 5:20-23:

**20 Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! 21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes And clever in their own sight! 22 Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine And valiant men in mixing strong drink, 23 Who justify the wicked for a bribe, And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!**

This is why we need to hear the gospel. This is why we need the gospel preached to us. This is why we must pour ourselves out into the sea of the good news of Jesus Christ. For **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.**

But how does the world go about taming the ferociousness of the gospel? How has the world taken that which turned the world upside down in its first 400 years to become seen more and more as nothing more than an irrelevant social club rather than a society transforming entity? Beloved, we have stopped preaching and hearing the gospel. We have replaced the gospel for a pseudo-gospel, a false gospel, a partial gospel, a counterfeit gospel! How does this happen? It happened as we allow the religious and behavior practices of the world become the religious and behavioral practices of the church. The church looks more and more like the world. And this happens when we start to listen to those whose teaching is not gospel-centered; not thoroughly Christ-centered and not primarily Scripture-centered to take root.

This was the potential for trouble for the church at Colossae, a watering down of the gospel. The false teachers, who peddled the mix of Christianity, Judaism, Paganism and whatever else suited their fancy, were becoming more and more influential and Paul was warning

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the believers not to give in to any kind of teaching where something other than Christ was essential and something in addition to Christ was emphasized. How the false teachers did this is identified for us in our text in one of three means of any combination of these three. The false teachers promoted some form of legalism, some form of mysticism and/or some form of asceticism to create their “Christian” hybrid religion. Don’t worry about those terms for we will define them and then see how these same three methods are being used by today’s “false teachers” those outside the church who are looking to influence and direct the thinking of the church.

But to understand what is going on both in our text and then in our world, we must define a few things. The first thing we need to define is what is meant by the word “righteousness”. I know that this is not in our text, but the idea of what makes a person righteous before God is at stake in our text. The word righteousness means “the quality of state of being righteous.” Beloved, it means to be right; to be completely and utterly sound; good, moral, perfect and holy. In relation to God we read in Psalm 145:17:

***The Lord is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His deeds.***

And in Psalm 11:7 we read:

***For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness; the upright will behold His face.***

This condition of being perfectly right, sound, just or holy is an attribute of God that belongs only to God in its fullest sense. So, what do we mean when we speak of God as being righteous? We mean that He consistently acts in accord with His own character. God always does what is good, what is right and what is just. Every action of God is consistent with His character and is thus right and just. But let us understand this; God is not to be defined by the term “righteous,” as much as the term “righteous” is to be defined by God. God is never to be measured by the standard of righteousness but rather it is God who sets the standard of righteousness. God alone is fully just and fully right.

With reference to men and women being righteous; their so-called or perceived righteousness apart from Christ is at best a dim reflection of this attribute of God. While both the Bible and even we will speak of men or women being righteous, they are never viewed or are to be viewed as being as righteous of God. In fact, in comparison to the righteousness of God, the Scriptures state unequivocally that there is “none righteous, not even one!” (Romans 3:10). There is no one who measures up to the righteous perfection of God. In other words, in ourselves and by ourselves no one is right with God and in fact we pursue a course of life that is wrong with God and we call that course and the actions on the course sin. Even anything that we do apart from God that might be perceived on our part as being good or righteous are condemned in Isaiah 64:6 as being the most filthy and disgusting of garments.

***For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.***

And here is our dilemma, if we are to be right and in right relationship with God, we must be made righteous, for we have no inherent righteousness of our own but rather only unrighteousness. Therefore, if the believer is to possess the necessary righteousness to be

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upright and fit to be in God's presence, it must be received from God. This is what we read in 1 Corinthians 1:30 and in Philippians 3:9:

***But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,***

***...and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith...***

So then, here is your doctrinal lesson on righteousness, but so what? Why is this important? All of this is important because of what our text communicates to us about the nature of false teaching. For all false teaching diminishes the person and work of Christ by making the following equation: Christ + \_\_\_\_\_ = righteousness (of being right with God). For legalism we will see that it is Christ + self-merits = righteousness. For mysticism we will see that it is Christ + self-revelation + righteousness. And for asceticism (which we will look in a couple of weeks) we will see that it is Christ + self-denial = righteousness. And what is amazing to me to realize is that Paul is communicating these concerns about such teaching to believers. For while such teaching may keep others from ever believing what is right about Christ alone, it also has the potential of diminishing the believer's (your own) view of Christ. All false teaching must deny in some form or another that God alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone, by faith alone as revealed in the Scriptures alone has brought, bought and sealed our salvation. These five concepts encapsulate the gospel. Remove any one of these and you have diminished the gospel, the glory of God and the exalted Christ.

So let us take these false views one by one as Paul warns the believers at Colossae, and by extension, the Holy Spirit warns believers today not to be kidnapped by any philosophy of teaching that is centered on one or more of these areas; this morning looking at the first two, legalism and mysticism.

## **I. Beware of legalism (2:16-17)**

*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.*

In a simple restatement of these verses, Paul communicates to the believers that there is to be a deliberate and conscious effort to allow no one to judge; that is "to decide against you; to condemn you or otherwise inhibit you from the belief of Christ alone; as Christ sufficient and as Christ supreme." How the false teachers brought their judgment was by form of legalism. But what is legalism? Let me give you a simple definition of legalism. Legalism is personally holding and maintaining some predefined set of rules so as to look good to others; most especially to look good to God (that is to make yourself look righteous). Legalism is Christ + personal adherence to a law in order to be righteous.

For the legalists of Colossae, the issue was this, why was it that these believers in Christ were not keeping the Old Testaments laws concerning what they ate and drank? And why were they not keeping up with the festivals and new moon celebrations and keeping the Sabbath. The logic as simply this, these things were from God so they must be good and they must be kept. The false teachers were saying that Christ + the keeping of the dietary laws of Leviticus and Christ + the keeping of the ceremonial holy days is what makes you righteous and worse yet, it is

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what keeps you righteous before God. Beloved, if we have to do something to keep ourselves in the perfect righteousness that God requires to inherit eternal life, then we are doomed. [Eph. 2:10] For me, I would rather rest confidently that Christ alone is righteous and that by my faith in Christ, I am clothed in His righteousness.

Notice that Paul calls all these adherences to making oneself righteous by means of keeping of such things as what, **“a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”** Here we learn of the danger of legalism; they are all substitutes for one’s completion in Christ. They all insist that there is a level of spirituality beyond what Christ has done for you. But rather than freeing a person to trust Christ, such a dependence upon one’s own performance actually leaves such a one in bondage. They keep a person always looking somewhere else, to the next experience, to the next rigid observance of a law, to the next set of do’s and don’ts to find joy. But it is never there. The momentary sense of satisfaction that comes by keeping the list, and the accolades that come from fellow legalists is eventually met with the loss of deep, lasting satisfaction. But all our satisfaction is to be found in Christ because we are complete in Christ. For the Colossians, at issue was that someone on the outside of the Church was telling those on in inside that satisfaction comes as you keep their list of dos and don’ts. If you didn’t keep them, they judged you or condemned you.

But how do we see this in the church today? Is legalism alive and well? Of course it is. When the world tells us that it’s okay to be religious, but just not too religious; that is their judgment. When the world tells us it’s okay to believe in Jesus, just don’t tell others that it is only Jesus by whom we must be saved; that is their judgment. When Peter and John were arrested for preaching Jesus and commanded by the religious leaders to stop their proclamation, what did they say? We read their response in Acts 4:19-20

***But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; 20 for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard."***

Peter and John would not be swayed by the religious and behavioral practices or judgments of the world. They had to preach Christ.

But do you know that legalism can be more subtle as well? Let me give you a graphic example of legalism. If you are driving down the street at 50 mph in a 35 mph zone and you see a police officer, what do you do? You slow down? Why? Out of external compliance to the law. You do not want the policeman to see you speeding, that is breaking the law; you do not want the penalty of such a violation. You are trying to impress the police officer even though just a moment ago were breaking the law; even though you wanted to go 50 mph. You see, legalism deals with outward appearance but does little or nothing to the heart. Do you know that two people can come to church and one can be a legalist while the other is free to rejoice in the righteousness of Christ? You see, one can come to church with the subtle thinking that it is Christ + coming to church that makes him right and acceptable to God. That is legalism, some outward adherence to a law or rule by which to make oneself acceptable to God. The other comes to church because Christ work on the cross alone has made him righteous and he comes out of sheer delight to praise the God who has made him righteous. One comes because of a sense of “having to” in order to be right with God; the other comes because of a wanting to because he has been made with God. The first one ought to feel guilt, remorse, or a sense of failure when he does not comply with his rule, while the other one, if he does miss church, feels like he has missed something; has lost out on fellowship and longs for a quick return. Legalism

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looks to keep the shadow and ignore the reality of Christ. When you have received the substance, you no longer need the shadows. Let me ask you, are you clinging to any shadows for spirituality rather than resting in the great sufficiency of Jesus Christ?

## II. Beware of mysticism (2:18)

*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,*

[Read Text] In addition to legalism, the next means employed by the false teachers at Colossae was that of mysticism. Now what is mysticism? In short, mysticism is seeking a religious experience apart from the revelation of Scripture and even apart from reason. The idea here is that a person, if he is to be right with God, must not use his God-given mind and understanding of the Bible, but rather look outside and beyond himself for a spiritual experience by which he then becomes right with God. It is Christ + experience that results in being right with God for this person.

What was happening at Colossae was that the believers were being looked down upon and even judged deficient because they had not had certain subjective experiences. And so Paul warns them, “Do not let them act like an umpire for the way you conduct your spiritual lives; do not let them belittle you, condemn you, and seek to rob you of your own joy in Christ!” This was taking place, so Paul exhorts them to take action to stop the melee of the mystics.

What were these mystics teaching? According to verse 18, these were **“delighting in self-abasement”** – that is they were calling attention to their self-prescribed humility. The word “self-abasement” is the same word translated elsewhere in the New Testament for humility. But this was not a godly humility but a false humility. They were the ones who said things like, “I have been fasting and praying for two weeks and the Lord told me....” They would draw attention to what they were doing to obtain their more spiritual insight.

In addition our text tells us they worshipped angels. Beloved, when someone claims to have had an experience with angels and then elevates this kind of experience above the life transforming truth of the Gospel, that Jesus alone saves sinners and grants His Holy Spirit for us to grow in His grace and knowledge, then it is not of God. Angels never draw attention to themselves. When the angels announced the birth of Christ to the shock and wonder of the shepherds, they declared first, “Glory to God in the highest!” (Luke 2:14). Angels are always giving glory to the Lord alone. Therefore I am suspicious of those who always want to talk about angels. Those who did so in Colossae regarded themselves as being more spiritual because of such experiences.

These also are said to be **“taking their stand on visions he has seen...”** People today seem to be more infatuated with their own or others visions, prophecies or words of knowledge than in the authority of Scripture alone. The question I have is this, is the Bible so deficient that we need such visions. Note beloved that these teachers stand on, find as their foundation, not the Word of God, but rather their “vision” which, if it did not come from some demonic influence most likely came as the result of eating bad pizza. In Hebrews 1:3 we are told that God has finally and infallibly spoken to us in and through His Son. So shall we trust the words of men or the words of God? , Generally speaking, those who embrace such visions have little regard for biblical doctrine. They live on a different plane and find doctrine to be too confining, too stuffy, and too academic and proclaim that it is nothing but a quenching of the Spirit. And so, with all confidence, these announce their revelations and words of knowledge in an attempt to tower over the ordinary believer. And if we allow them to, they will defraud, cheat, rule against the unsuspecting Christian and intimidate us because if we do not understand enough of the Bible to

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realize the hoax being perpetrated upon us. This is why we need the full gospel preached daily to our souls; so that we will not be influenced to behave this way.

What is the danger of mysticism? This non-intellectual, experiential, seeking something apart or beyond what Scripture reveals approach to Christianity causes a person to be **“inflated without cause by his fleshly mind.”** In other words, those who do this are full of hot air. They are old wind bags peddling their wares of ignorance to God and His word. This one is not steeped in God’s Word and does not want others to know or speak from the authority of God’s Word alone. Interestingly, this person who seeks to promote their own “humility” or self-abasement is described by Paul and the Holy Spirit as arrogant. Such a person is not focused upon the sufficiency and supremacy of Jesus Christ but rather is fixed upon . issues of personal gain, popularity, power, and the satisfaction of lording over others. His mind is “fleshly” – that is earth-oriented and carnal rather than spiritual. And so he is puffed up by his claims to great spirituality. But beloved, the opposite is true of the believer; the person who has a firm grasp of biblical truth will be humbled by it. This is what we read in Isaiah 66:1-2:

**66 Thus says the Lord, "Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? 2 "For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being," declares the Lord. "But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.**

The mystic is puffed up and arrogant because he does not grasp the very things he claims to understand. Truth always brings us low so that our confidence is not in ourselves but in Jesus Christ alone.

But like legalism, mysticism can also be subtle and in fact may play a larger role in your thinking than you realize. How so? Remember that mysticism is simply the seeking of religious experiences apart from the revelation of Scripture itself or of reason. Young people, if you have ever said, “When I am a teenager, then I will seek to know the Lord better” – such is not Biblical, for Jesus wants you to know Him now. How many of us have said or have heard or are entertaining the idea of “Well when I finish High School or when I become an adult; or when I finish college, then I will seek to be more spiritual.” That is a mystic approach. It can be found when we think, “When I get married, then I will be spiritual, then I will be complete.” Tell that to Paul who never married. Young people, what of young Samuel who sought the Lord as a young boy? What about Daniel who served the Lord as a teenager?

Other errors and indications of mysticism is found in thoughts or statements like these: obtaining a degree in the Bible will unlock the door of being spiritual; or the opposite; not studying the Bible and doctrine so as not to quench the work of the Holy Spirit will make me righteous.

How about this one? Have you ever employed the “the blind open and point” method of Bible reading and study? This is where you close your eyes, open your Bible and read whatever God “providentially” causes you to point to. Why is it that men and women, great Bible teachers and pastors, and churches develop Bible reading plans only for you to ignore them? God has given us minds to use and expect us to be intentional and even systematic in our approach to reading and studying His word. To read only what you “feel” you should read is a mystical approach. Don’t get me wrong, if you feel like reading Leviticus, do it! But after you have read something you are disciplining yourself to read

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## III. Be focused on Christ (2:19)

*...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*

How can we avoid the pressures to be influenced and swayed by the obvious and the subtle errors of legalism and mysticism? I offer you three practices that will help you remember that you are righteous, you are right with God only because of Christ and that anything you do or experience, if it is good and Biblical, is not what makes you righteous, but is the result of Christ having made you righteous. This beloved is the gospel.

### 1. Be Christ-centered

Paul said that the false teachers were **“not holding fast to the head...”** that is Christ. They were not clinging to Christ. They were not seeking to be Christ-centered. They had failed to understand the most basic issue of Christianity; that it is Christ. Beloved, may it never be that you think you have grown beyond your daily, ongoing need and relationship to Jesus Christ.

How can we spot any teaching, philosophy or thought that is going to negatively influence our spiritual lives? Beloved, when the emphasis of the teaching moves away from the simplicity of continuing to grow in your knowledge of Jesus Christ and to grow in your dependence upon Him, then it false and is diminishing of Christ. Be Christ-centered so that He will come to have first place in everything (Colossians 1:18).

### 2. Be God-supplied

If you are in Christ, then you are united with His body, that is the church. And according to our text, it is in our relationship to the church that God supplies what is needed to maintain spiritual growth. This is the implication of **“being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.”** The words **“supplied and held together”** are both present passive verbs, which means that there is a continual supplying and sustaining going on outside of the Christian, provided by God and applied to strengthen his growth. It is not just what the Christian is doing that causes his growth; God, through the body of believers around him that challenges, exhorts, encourages, and motivates his growth in Christ. Be God-supplied and know that the warehouse of your spiritual needs are found in the body of Christ.

We must never come to think that the Christian life can be lived in isolation from the rest of the body. Growth is nurtured within the fellowship of the church. In fact it is nearly impossible for a person to grow spiritually outside of a healthy, continual, and engaged relationship to a body of believers. Christ has so designed and equipped His body that each member has an effect upon the other for the purpose of spiritual growth.

### 3. Be Christ-supported

Finally, let us remember that we are never alone in the journey of spiritual growth! Each of the **“joints and ligaments,”** that's you and me have a role in helping to support one another's spiritual growth. One translation of this verse says it this way, **“Such a one does not keep his hold upon Christ, the Head, from whom the body, in all its parts nourished and strengthened by its points of contact and its connections, grows with a divine growth.”** Solomon said it this way in Proverbs 18:1-2

**1 He who separates himself seeks his own desire, he quarrels against all sound wisdom. 2 A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind.**



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By being here today you are making "points of contact" as you study the Word, as you fellowship, as you engage in prayer for one another, as you bear one another's burdens, as you offer encouragement, and as you exhort someone to follow after Christ. All of these "connections" are gifts from the Lord so that your growth in Christ will ultimately be "from God." To be Christ-supported is to be connect to the and engage in the Church. As we sing about, proclaim, study, teach, rehearse, talk about, pray about and otherwise embrace the gospel, then we are protecting ourselves from the spiritual fakes offered up by legalism and mysticism. May we so engage ourselves to the glory of God and for the growth which comes from God alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone, by faith alone according to Scripture alone.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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