

# 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 3- the Gospel) – Colossians 2:16-19*

### **Three questions:**

1. Are you a Christian?
2. Do you know the gospel?
3. With whom have you shared the gospel this past week?

This morning I wish to speak to you about the gospel. I know what some of you are thinking, “Doesn’t Pastor Ed always speak about the gospel? Hasn’t he been speaking about the gospel particularly in these past few messages from Colossians 2?” The answer is “yes” of course. The fundamental issue being addressed by Paul in Colossians 2 is an attack on the gospel that is coming from the false teachings in and around the city of Colossae. Two thousand years later, we find ourselves in the same place. The church is surrounded by false teachings and pseudo-gospels that are seeking to weaken the very fabric of our relationship to God. For rather than making us more and more dependent upon God, the false teachings that surround us; be it evolution, secularism, humanism, Mormonism or any other unbiblical “ism” you might think of; are undermining the authority of God’s Word, diminishing our view of God and lowering our vision of the person of Christ.

While we are concerned about the false teachings about the gospel in Colossians 2; let us read again from Colossians 1 this morning as we look to know and appreciate the gospel more:

### **Colossians 1:3-6**

***3 We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints; 5 because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel 6 which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth...***

We need to be reminded of the greatness of the gospel – the grander of the good news that the supremely holy God that cannot tolerate sin in His presence has done something extraordinary to make sinful men holy and acceptable in His sight by the work of His Son Jesus Christ alone. So, let me tell you about the greatness of the gospel.

If I were to tell you that all is not well with the world, you might be inclined to agree and point to political issues and hostile hot-spots that bring unrest and uneasiness to our time. But at its core, what’s wrong with our world is that the relationship between the Creator God and His creation has been broken. What or who has broken this relationship with God? You have – each and every one of us has gone our own way and has rebelled against our Creator and has refused to acknowledge His rightful rule over us. We see this in our world as it staggers from crisis to crisis. We see in our world much that is sad, suffering, and struggling. The truth of the matter is that everything humanity seeks to accomplish on its own, apart from God ends with more dissatisfaction. Beloved, you and I are surrounded by people that lack any true purpose in their

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lives apart from being self-centered, self-focused and in the process, ultimately lost. Whenever and however we declare ourselves independent from God we will end up discouraged and disheartened. And God will hold us responsible for every independent act.

So, what are we to do? Can we be reconciled to our Creator? Can we know Him intimately and lovingly? Can God be more to us than some distant impersonal force? You know the answer – yes, God can be known as our Father. The Bible declares that God can be known, but here is the twist; here is where so many struggle and kick and scream; for God can only be known and must be known on His own terms! If we are to have a right relationship to God, it must be according to His Word. Are you prepared to listen to what God has said about life and about how to be made right with Him? Let me walk through the gospel – the very gospel that was under attack in the city of Colossae and continues to be under attack today.

It all started in the Garden, when the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, had a perfect relationship with God. Genesis 3 describes their relationship with God as one in which God Himself ***"walked in the garden in the cool of the day"*** in order to fellowship with them. This was a perfect relationship; they were right with God and were living according to God's Word. And what we learn from all this is that if we could live according to God's Word, we would be right with God, accepted by God and blessed by God.

But Adam and Eve did not continue to live according to God's Word but disobeyed God by eating of the fruit of a tree that would give them the knowledge of good and evil. In doing this, they were trying to make themselves like God. Because of this, God forced them out of the Garden, which pictures the broken relationship between them and Himself. The disobedience of Adam in partaking of the fruit is the first sin of humanity against God and every one of the sons and daughters of Adam have been committing it ever since. We are born self-centered and with the desire to live for ourselves rather than in obedience to God. The Bible speaks of this as being spiritually dead. When we want to live according to our own desires, we are spiritually dead to God. When we dislike the idea of God interfering with our lives, then we are spiritually dead. Whenever we live by our own rules, we are forsaking God's standard and God's expectations on His creation and such a falling short of these standards is called sin.

God constantly reminds humanity of His standard. In Leviticus 19:2 God says, ***"You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."*** The standard of God is moral perfection – absolute holiness – without deviation. Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount declaring, ***"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect"*** (Matthew 5:48).

God has not changed His standard. What He expected from Adam and Eve, He also requires of humanity today. We are to be perfect or righteous before Him. We are to perfectly keep all His standard if we are to enjoy His blessings and presence. Jesus said the same thing in essence in Mark 12:30, ***"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."***

I don't know what you think, but I know that neither I nor any of you come close to keeping that standard – and you know why? Because we don't want to. There is not one person here who in themselves wants to commit, devote, and spend themselves in such complete surrender to God. But this is what God expects and so we all stand guilty of treason against our Creator. So, what can we do about this? We can do nothing? There is nothing that we can do to make ourselves right with God; no amount of rule keeping, no amount of religious experience, no amount of denying ourselves certain things – there is nothing we can do to establish peace with God. That is the bad news. Now for the good news. God, through the bloody cross of His Son who bore the just penalty of our sin, reconciled, made peace and declared right all those who would

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call upon the name of Jesus for such a salvation. God has made the way for us to be back in right relationship with Him. How was this done?

There are two things about the gospel that are paramount for us to understand; two needful things for sinners to be made right with God. **First**, we need forgiveness of our sins – our sins, or violations of God’s standard are not the results of some occasional bad choices we have made. We sin; we forsake God’s Word and Will because we are born with a nature to do so. We are not made sinners because we sin; we are sinners by birth and therefore we sin.

The **second** thing we need is righteousness – an alien righteousness; a righteousness outside ourselves. In our last look at Colossians 2, we defined righteousness as “the quality of state of being righteous; to be right; to be completely and utterly sound; good, moral, perfect and holy.” To be so completely righteous would mean that we have on our record that we have perfect lives that have lived in perfect obedience to God.

We need forgiveness of sins and total righteousness. How can we have such things when we continually sin and we all know by our own experience that we are not perfectly righteous in our lives?

Let us see how we are forgiven of our sins. To be forgiven of sin is to go to the cross of Jesus Christ. It is there that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, that is death, so that we no longer need to pay for them. In Ephesians 1:7 we read these words, ***“In [Jesus] we have redemption through His blood [His death on the cross in our place – which is what?] the forgiveness of our trespasses...”***

In our study of Colossians we read in chapter 2, verse 13, ***“When you were dead in your transgressions...[God] made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.”***

Before our sins are forgiven, pardoned, and paid for, we are dead to God and deserving only of His wrath and hostility against our sinfulness. And so, if we are to be free from God’s just condemnation of our sin we must look to Jesus, for He said of Himself in Mark 10:45, ***“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give His life a ransom for many.”*** Jesus gave His life as payment for the lives of those who would believe upon Him and what He did on the cross.

Because of this, Romans 8:1-2 rightly declares, ***“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free [pardoned; forgiven; paid for] from the law of sin and of death.”***

That is the gospel! That is the greatness news ever! God forgives our sins. And how do we know we are forgiven? Because the forgiven repent of their sins, and they believe that the cross of Jesus alone is full payment and pardon of their sins. On the cross, Jesus paid for our sins so that we would not have to. Do you believe this? Those who believe this repent; by the grace of God, the working of the power of God within them, they forsake their own sinful ways and desires and by that same grace they now strive to live for God.

So, the gospel is about forgiveness of sin, but it is also about this need for righteousness – this absolutely perfectly lived life. Most of us who have walked with Christ for any time know perfectly well that being a Christian does not mean that you start living or even obtain living a perfect life. While we are perfectly forgiven and our sins are completely paid for, we continue to struggle with the sin nature. And so, if God demands a perfectly lived life to be in His presence, how can we possess that? Forgiveness of sins wipes the slate clean, but we still need perfect living. Where does that perfect life come from? Here the words of Romans 3:21-22;

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***21 But now apart from the Law [apart from the self-merit and effort] the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, 22 even the righteousness of God through [from] faith in Jesus Christ for [to] all those who believe;***

Let's understand this; to all who believe in the work of Jesus Christ, that is, they see His death on the cross as being for their own deserved sin; they see Jesus as taking their place of punishment; to these God has manifest or made known a righteousness; a righteousness that God gives, credits or imputes to them.

Let's use the picture of a bank account. Every two weeks, my account is credited from the church account. I love to see that amount imputed or credited to mine because it means I can pay my mortgage and buy my groceries. In spiritual terms, before we come to Christ, we are all morally bankrupt; incredibly and infinitely overdrawn in our account. We are in the red and owe more than we can ever repay. Forgiveness of sin is bringing that account to zero. To be granted God's righteousness in Christ is to fill that account with all the worth and value of the righteous life of Jesus Christ. In other words, God not only forgives us our sins, but also treats us as if we have lived the perfect life of His Son Jesus Christ. This is how God can accept us with out violating His own justice and holiness. We have no righteousness or holiness of our own, but when we are made alive together with Christ, God credits our lives with the perfect righteousness of Christ. This is what the next part of Romans 3, verses 23-24 declares:

***23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory [the perfect, holy, righteous standard] of God, 24 being justified [declared righteous – credited with the righteousness of Christ] as a gift by His grace [not something earned in anyway] through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus [the work and merits of Jesus].***

This is good news – this is the gospel. That by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in the work of Christ alone according to Scriptures alone that we have everything we need to be right with God. The false teachers at Colossae and so many even today want to add something to this gospel, taking away the supreme value of Christ so that they can feel that they have some value apart from Christ. Yet the testimony of Scripture is clear. Let us look at 2 Corinthians 5:20-21 and see the clear statement about from where the gift of righteous comes. We read:

***20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.***

I would like you to become comfortable and familiar with verse 21. In theological circles, we refer to this verse as "The Great Exchange" for what it explains is that Christ took all of our sin; all that is bad and the very worst of us upon Himself and was punished accordingly [God made Jesus who knew no sin to be sin in our place] – all this was credited to Jesus' account and in exchange, God credited to our account the very righteous of Christ – which is the perfectly lived life of obedience to all of God's standard. In other words, on the cross, God treated Jesus as though He had committed every sin of all His people and because of that cross God treats us as if we have lived the very perfect life of Jesus. What can be added to that?

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished two key things for us. First, His death on the cross paid for the penalty for our sin so that we need not die to pay the penalty for

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our sin! Second, it provides for us the perfect, righteous life that would be credited to us so that we are now morally acceptable [righteous] to God. We need this because we can not live a perfect life of our own!

When God counts our sins against Jesus and then counts His righteousness to us, this and this alone makes us right; secures our relationship to God – nothing more to add. Just a couple of verses up in 2 Corinthians 5:19 we read, **“namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them...”**

Again, this is the testimony of Scripture. In Philippians 3:9 we read of the great aspiration of Paul, which is to be our greatest aspiration as well, that we **“may be found in Him [is that your desire], not having a righteousness of [our] own derived from the Law [something we try to do], but that which is through faith in Christ [trusting in what Christ alone did], the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith...”**

Now then, what does all this have to do with Colossians 2 and the verses that we have yet to study in detail? What we have looked at is the gospel, that which the Scripture declares to be true, that Christ alone took all our sin and paid for it on the cross; and that the righteousness of Christ alone, imputed or credited to us by the grace of God, as a gift from God, is our only hope of being right with God. This was under attack in Colossae and the false teachers were trying to add to this gospel their own works of keeping rules, of seeking certain kinds of religious experiences and of denying themselves different things teaching that by these additions, they were right with God. Next week we will look at what all this means to us, but for now, let us roll it all into one question.

You see, if our salvation and our right standing with God is truly the work of Christ alone, then can I live however I want, good or bad, since its all about what Christ alone did? Of course the answer is, “no”! But are we saying that our works of faith or our good deeds don’t matter? The answer to this second question is both no and yes.

With regard to forgiveness of our sin and of being declared righteous in Jesus, the all of our good deed count toward nothing because none of our good deeds could ever merit our salvation. Beloved, if we ever entertain the notion that our good deeds earn us anything with God, then we are also entertaining a very low view of the perfection of God. Its kind of like asking a three year old to clean his room. He may pick up a few things here and there but ultimately he is incapable of thoroughly cleaning his room according to the standard of the parents. And so we must understand that even if we could perform a thousand good works every day for a hundred years, we would yet fail to attain to God’s perfection.

Let’s look at this another way. In a moment I will tell you that our good works in Christ do matter, but not with regard to being made right with God. For how could all the good works we might perform ever make more justified or more right with God than what Christ has provided for us. Can we actually add to what Jesus accomplished so perfectly. To add anything to the work of Christ would to declare that His work on the cross was somehow insufficient or incomplete and that we need a supplement. Let me ask you again, what can you add to the work of Christ to make you any more right with God. This was Paul’s argument with the believers in Galatia when he wrote in Galatians 3:3, **“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit [not of yourselves], are you now being perfected by the flesh? [by what you do]?”**

So, are we saying that our works of faith or our good deeds don’t matter? No, they don’t matter with regard to being made right with God. But on the other hand, there is a yes to that question as well. Our good works do matter because we have been made right with God in order to do such things. This is the teaching of Ephesians 2:8-10 where we read:

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**8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.**

What these verses tell us is this; that God did everything necessary to save us so that we could then work for Him. So, while our good works never do anything to bring us salvation, they should certainly accompany our salvation.

We are never saved by good work, but rather by faith, which is not a work, but a gift, granted to us by God, both according to verse 8 as well as Philippians 1:29. But saving faith always results in good works. We are saved by faith alone in the work of Christ, not as a result of our good works. But saving faith always results in good works. As it has been said so well, *“Faith alone saves, but not the faith that is alone.”*

This was the very concern of James. In his letter he asks how God or any other person will believe that the faith we have is genuine if there are no good deeds to show for it? In James 2:26 he concludes, **“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”** If a person claims to be right with God and yet demonstrates no consistent or real fruit of good works or of purity of life, such a one is fooling themselves.

So, by way of application, why should we seek to do good works? Let me give two reasons for striving after good works and living in light of the gospel. First, we should seek to walk in the good works for which we have been recreated out of gratitude. Because God has reconciled us to Himself by the cross of His Son, and has forgiven our sins and has credited us with the righteousness of Christ, we ought to demonstrate our love and appreciation in the form of obedience to His word. Hear the words of Titus 2:11-14 in this regard:

**11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, 14 who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.**

The second reason why we ought to strive for good works in our lives is because when God justifies us He gives us His Holy Spirit to dwell within us. The work of the Spirit is to constantly remind us of what Christ has done, and to empower us to live a life that pleases God in service, devotion, purity and goodness. What does a life empowered by the Spirit look like? You know! We read in Galatians 5:22-23:

***But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...***

And then in Galatians 5:25 we read, ***“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”*** If we have been born again, brought into right relationship with God by the work of the Spirit, let us then behave also in the way the Spirit would have us behave.

Beloved, God is here. He is among us. It is **He “who is at work in [us] both to will and to work for His good pleasure”** (Philippians 2:13), therefore we can work out our salvation with fear and trembling (2:12). Let us remember that the gospel is this good news that God has reached down to us through Jesus Christ to make us His friends instead of His enemies. As our

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heavenly Father He desires to be engaged with us in our daily human existence. It is God who has initiated our having personal relationship with Him. He has done the work, through His Son, by the power of His Spirit and by this work alone we can know He will welcome us into heaven. When we stand before the throne of God, we will not be touting anything we have done, as if our entrance we dependent on us. Rather we will be exalting the work of Christ, saying in the words of Revelation 5:12, ***"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing."*** That doesn't leave any room for us to boast now does it?

This is the gospel beloved. This is to be our declaration, our boast, our life and our hope. Perhaps there is someone here this morning that has not yet come to embrace this good news. I do not want to leave anyone wondering what they must do in light of these things. You must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Begin by speaking to God in prayer. Repent of your sins and of your rebellion against coming to God on His terms. Repent of living your life as though God did not exist. Ask Him to forgive you these things and accept you through the death of Jesus Christ. Ask Him to give you eternal life through Christ's resurrection. And ask Him to help you from now on to live with Jesus Christ as your ruler and Lord.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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