

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 4) – Colossians 2:16-23

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.¹ 20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 21 “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” 22 (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) — in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? 23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Over the past several weeks we have concerned ourselves about the essence of the gospel, asking ourselves what exactly is the gospel, this good news about Jesus Christ. In the course of our examination, we must agree with Scripture that the gospel is truly the power of God for salvation to all who believe. But just what is to be believed about the gospel? That God, by Christ alone, by grace alone, according to the authority of Scripture alone, by faith alone (or trusting in such truth alone) and all for God’s glory alone has initiated, executed and secured salvation for all those who believe upon His Son, Jesus Christ.

We have zeroed in on the question of why we need this work of God through Christ; noting that because of our sins, we deserve to die; but our sins are forgiven us in that they have been paid by the Substitute, Jesus Christ. We also noted that forgiveness of sins is not enough, nor is it all that we gain from faith in Christ. For in addition to this, we also need our lives to be credited or counted as if we have lived a perfectly righteous life. For those who have faith in Christ, they also come to see that the righteousness, the perfection of Jesus’ obedient life, is imputed or charge to our account so that when God looks upon those who have faith in Jesus, He treats them as though they had lived the perfect, holy life of Christ. And so, the gospel is wonderful encapsulated in the words of 2 Corinthians 5:21, which is known as the great exchanged. We read there;

[God] made [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf [to be our Substitute for the forgiveness of sins], so that we might become the righteousness of God in [Jesus – to be counted as if we have lived the life of Jesus].

Here is the gospel – on the cross, God treated and punished Jesus as if He had committed every sin of all the people He came to save (our sins were charged to Jesus); and in exchange, God treats and blesses those who believe this as if they have committed every righteous and perfect action and attitude of Jesus (His righteousness charged to us).

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

We have considered this aspect of the gospel because this is what was being attacked at Colossae. Whether it be overt or covert, any system of thinking, any philosophy of teaching, any practice of life that seeks to obtain a right standing with God apart from or in addition to the righteousness of Christ is a false gospel – it is a diminishing of the beauty and perfection of Jesus. When Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, an area or state just north of Colossae about a decade or so before he wrote Colossians, he uttered this warning:

Galatians 1:8-9

8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel [a righteousness from God] contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

And how do we know that Paul was concerned with what God alone did through Christ alone by the power of the Spirit alone? Here the testimony of Galatians 3:2-3;

Galatians 3:2-3

2 This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

Beloved, salvation from start to finish is a “God-thing” – it is the working of God that begins by His initiative and then works “through us” [something changes in us] to His glory. The fundamental equation for salvation according to Colossians might well look like this; *Christ’s death on the cross in the place of His people + Christ life of total obedience to the will of God = Salvation (forgiveness of sin + imputed righteousness of Christ).*

The only issue for the people at Colossae as well as for all people today is this; do you believe this? Whether subtle or not, the false teachers at Colossae had twisted this equation into something like the following:

Christ’s work + what I do (legalism) = salvation

Christ’s work + what I experience (mysticism) = salvation

Christ’s work + what I don’t do (asceticism) = salvation

This is essentially the outline of our text as found in Colossians 2:16-23. And while all this may not look so subtle; it can be dangerously so and if we are not careful, we might find ourselves falling into the traps of a “Christ + something else” mentality. For after we deal with the problems of adding such things to our relationship with Christ so that we might contribute to our salvation; the question is this, what role then do good works (the keeping of the dos and don’ts) or experience play in our salvation.

Let us first work through the problem of the false teaching at Colossae so we know what we are dealing with and then seek to answer the question that the false teachers were in essence trying to answer, what is the role of works and experience in one’s salvation?

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

I. Christ's work + what I do (legalism) = salvation (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.

We dealt with these two verses a couple of weeks back; so let me simply recap at this point. 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 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. We are to rest confidently that Christ alone is righteous and that by faith in Christ, we are clothed in His righteousness. Spurgeon once said, “It is easier to save us from our sins than from our righteousness.” We are so prone to want to add our works and efforts to the equation of making us right before God. And if someone comes along as says, “Why are not you doing these things, for these things make you right with God?” we are apt to listen and fall under their condemnation, their judgment of how salvation is obtained.

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 or diminishing additions for one's completion in Christ. Let me ask you, is Christ righteousness enough or not?

II. Christ's work + what I experience (mysticism) = salvation (2:18-19a)

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...

The second way in which the false teachers proposed a right relationship with God was Christ's work + personal experience. Some kind of extra-biblical, mystical, romantic type experience was being touted as a necessary part of salvation. 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

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

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 false teachers are also said to be those **“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 we do not understand enough of the Bible to 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 persons are **“not holding**

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

fast to the head” – who is Christ. 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

III. Christ’s work + what I don’t do (asceticism) = salvation (2:20-23)

20 If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, 21 “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” 22 (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) — in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? 23 These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

There is a lot here that we could discuss, but for sake of efficiency, let me summarize what Paul is communicating to the Colossians. What we have here is a kind of negative legalism. Whereas the legalism of verses 16-17 focused on a list of dos – things to keep; the asceticism, or avoidance of certain things here in these verses, the not handling, tasting or touching is in view. Asceticism is the belief that a person can be more right with God by practicing self-denial and/or self-mortification. It was thought that to be right with God, one must give up, or deny certain things. But notice that these are the mere **“commandments and teachings of men”**. Paul says they have **“the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement (or false humility) and even of severe treatment of the body....but are of not value against fleshly indulgence.”** In other words, if you are giving things up, or denying yourself certain things, some of which may even be good and proper for a believer, thinking that by that you are making yourself right with God, then you are simply satisfying your own carnal, fleshly nature.

It all sounds so right because we might agree, at least in principle, with the statement, “a Christian never (fill in the blank) – let’s say smokes.” But the issue is not whether a Christian should or should not participate in certain activities or actions, but whether or not one views the avoidance of such activities as that which makes them right with God. Do you see the difference? “A Christian should never see R rated movies because if they do, they are not right with God.” Wait a minute, a Christian can go to G rated movies not be right with God. We are never going to make ourselves righteous by going to see G rated movies rather than R rated movies.

With regard to the issue; we need forgiveness of our sin and of being declared righteous in Jesus, and all the good we might ever do counts 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. It’s 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 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 what we read 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:

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

Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

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 be useful to Him and work for Him. So, while our good works never do anything to bring us salvation, they should certainly accompany our salvation. To say this another way, 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 of Ephesians 2, 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 [let us live on the edge of holiness rather than on the edge of carnality] 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, then let us then behave in the way the Spirit would have us behave; in the way that God has ordained us to behave.

+ Coming in First Place ~ the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

Remember the issue was adding to the work of Christ. Let me close then by showing you the difference between the true gospel according to the Bible and the false gospel that gets peddled in it various forms:

Salvation is NOT BY WORKS (Ephesians 2:8-9)	Salvation is UNTO GOOD WORKS (Ephesians 2:10)
Good works are not the MEANS of salvation (Titus 3:5).	Good works are the RESULT of salvation (Titus 3:8).
Good works are not the CAUSE of salvation.	Good works are the CONSEQUENCE of salvation.
Good works are not what a person must do to be saved. <i>"But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5).</i>	Good works are what a saved person does. <i>"This is a trustworthy statement; and concerning these things I want you to speak confidently, so that those who have believed God will be careful to engage in good deeds." (Titus 3:8).</i>
The unsaved person performs good works to try to obtain and merit God's favor.	The saved person performs good works because he has obtained God's favor. (Titus 2:11-14).
(Why do believers perform good works?) Believers do not work in order to be saved.	(Why do believers perform good works?) Believers work because they are saved!
FLESHLY WORKS: that which an unsaved person tries to produce in order to be saved.	FAITH WORKS: that which God produces in the saved person. "[The God of peace]...equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ..." (Hebrews 13:21).
FLESHLY WORKS cannot please God (Romans 8:8).	FAITH WORKS are pleasing to God (Hebrews 11:6; 1 Thessalonians 1:3).
The unsaved boaster: "Look what I have done!" (Matthew 23:5—"to be noticed by men".	The saved person: "Thank you Lord for what You are doing in me" (Phil. 2:13).
The works of an unsaved person are grounds for boasting.	The works of a saved person are cause for praise to God.

+ Coming in First Place ~ the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

"For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God" (Romans 4:2).	"Having been filled with the fruits of righteousness, which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:11).
DEAD WORKS (Hebrews 6:1; 9:14; Ephesians 5:11) Working apart from God's LIFE. Works produced by the old nature (Galatians 5:19-21)	FRUITFUL WORKS (Colossians 1:10) Works which flow out of a right relationship to the living God.
The unsaved person boasts in SELF ("I") (Luke 18:11-12).	The saved person boasts in the LORD (1 Corinthians 1:29-31).
A person cannot WORK FOR his salvation (Romans 4:5).	A saved person can WORK OUT the salvation that he has (Philippians 2:12).
EMPTY: "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling."	FULL: "God is able to may all grace abound to you so that...you may have an abundance for every good deed..." (2 Corinthians 9:8; 1 Corinthians 15:58)

Soli Deo Gloria

Copyright © 2010 Edward K. Godfrey. This message is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this message must contain the above copyright notice. This message may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Edward K. Godfrey, Pastor, Hope Community Bible Church, and 2300 South 13th Street, Rogers, AR 72758.