

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

The Christian’s Experience – Putting On: Sanctified Fellowship (4:7-18)

Sanctified Fellowship (4:14) – Luke

Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas.

This morning we bring our study of the book of Colossians to an end; and an end that I hope in no way is seen as anti-climatic. For as all of you who have been a part of this study know, we have been closing this study over the past several weeks noting the people that Paul identifies here at the end of this letter as having been an encouragement and having been engaged with him in his service to the church. In a phrase, we have been doing character studies, looking as best we can into the lives of these people who spent themselves for the service of the One about whom this book was written; they spent themselves in the service of Jesus Christ, the One who alone is supreme God come to us in the flesh; wonder of wonder; and as the One who is alone our sufficient Savior, come to reconcile us to God by means of His death on the cross as the only sufficient payment for the sins of His people.

The question then is how do character studies exalt our view of Jesus and challenge us to succeed in one of the stated purposes of this study of Colossians as found in 1:18, **“that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”?**

Let me remind you that Colossians 1 and 2 are highly doctrinal; that is, they speak to us concerning the person, the majesty, the wonder, the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus. They help us answer the important question, “Who is Jesus?” Then, beginning in Colossians 3 and running through the end of the letter, the emphasis shifts from explaining who Jesus is; to asking the question, “how then shall we live in light of who Jesus is?” I pray that you never grow tired of the word “sanctification” – that process where by God’s grace believers are to be progressing toward being more and more like Jesus in conduct and character. In Matthew 28:19 we are given the Great Commission – the great task of the church to **“go therefore and make disciples...”**; that is, to make learners, followers, reflections of Jesus Christ for the entire world to see. Colossians 3-4 is simply a description of what these disciples, these followers of Christ look like as they are those who, according to Colossians 3:2, **“set [their] mind on things above, not on things that are on earth.”** True disciples of Christ are those who, according to Colossians 3:5, **“consider the members of [their] earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, evil desire, and greed...”** and have according to verses 9-10, **“laid aside the old self with its evil practices and have put on the new self...”** The follower of Jesus is the person who according to Colossians 3:12-17, has **“put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”** and is **“bearing with one another and forgiving each other.”** The one who is striving after Christlikeness will **“let the peace of Christ rule in [his] heart”** and will **“let the word of Christ richly dwell within [him].”** A learner of Jesus is one who longs to practice the principle of **“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”**

In Colossians 3:18-4:1-5, Paul lays out how this striving to have Christ come to have first place in everything looks like in our families as well as in the work place. And then we come to the list of names, those individuals that have ministered, served, helped, encouraged, simply been involved with Paul in such a way that these lives somehow expressed to him some of the

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very virtues of Christlikeness. In other words, this is more than just a list of names, but it a mosaic of folks who picture for us the body of Christ, serving one another, and picturing for one another Christlikeness. Beloved, our engagement and involvement with one another is toward one intentional purpose; to manifest Christ to one another.

And so, whether we are looking at the faithful service of Tychicus, or the fearlessness of Aristarchus, or the fervency of Epaphras to name a few, we have these portraits of Christ meant for our encouragement. And to pause for just a moment to bring an application, let me ask you a question; “What would Paul say of you with regard to your service toward both the leadership as well as the general fellowship of this body of believers? What descriptions would you or others in the fellowship assign to you?”

Of course, we have looked at each of these names, leaving this one for last, this most famous of all the names in the list, the man named Luke. We are looking at Luke last because as we prepare to make our transition from the study of this letter to the Colossians to our journey through the book of Acts, we see that we have providentially been presented with one whose Christlikeness was used in a most extraordinary way; to present to the church a two-volume work comprising of 1/5 of the entire New Testament and explaining to us answers to the questions; Who is Jesus?; What did Jesus do?; and What is Jesus still doing? For it is this Luke who wrote his Gospel/History; the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles.

But just who is this Luke? What do we know about him? What is it that made him tick with such a passion to know and make known the person of Jesus as well as the work of Jesus? What we know of Luke by way of direct reference is simple and straightforward as he is only mentioned by name three times in the New Testament. Here in Colossians 4:14 we read, **“Luke, the beloved physician sends you greetings...”** In Philemon 23-24 we read, **“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus greets you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.”** And finally, in what is Paul’s last letter before his martyrdom we read in 2 Timothy 4:10-11, **“for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica... Only Luke is with me.”**

What do we learn about the character of Luke then from these verses? We learn at least four things...

- 1) that he was a physician;
- 2) that he was a “fellow worker” with Paul in his ministry as a missionary;
- 3) that he was steadfast – as he stays the course with Paul to the very end even after seeing Demas, his one time close associate, desert Paul in his time of greatest need because of his own love for the things of the world, and
- 4) that he was “beloved” of Paul. Paul has the deepest of affection, admiration and delight in his friendship with Luke. To put it into today’s vernacular, Paul and Luke were “tight” – the most familiar of friends, and the closest of comrades. This is no small testimony to the character of Luke.

To state this another way, when you think of Paul and his closest of associates, do you not often here of Paul and Barnabas? We will often talk of every believer needing, like Paul, a Barnabas to encourage him as well as Timothy to train and disciple. Might I suggest that based on the testimony of the book of Acts, namely that Paul and Barnabas did go their separate ways,

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that what we see in Colossians, 2 Timothy and Philemon, coupled with Luke’s own testimony in Acts is perhaps one of Paul most dear relationships, one that was perhaps closer and more intimate than between Paul and Barnabas, that is Paul’s relationship with Luke. And so, as we take a few moments to examine the life of Luke, let me ask you to begin to apply the characteristics of his life to your own by asking yourself; to whom am I seeking to be a Luke? Luke’s name means “bringer of light” – and so I may ask, “to whom are you bringing the light of Christ in all its fullness?”

So then, who is Luke? What qualities of Christlike character do we find in him that we can pray for to be found in ourselves? I would like to focus this morning on just one, namely that in Luke we find a man of commitment.

Like our Lord Jesus, Luke was a man of commitment; dedicating himself to the service and well-being of his people. When considering our Lord Jesus, let us be reminded of His commitment to serving God and the people God had given Him. In John 4:34 Jesus said,

“My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.”

More than anything else, Jesus was intent on accomplishing the will and the work the Father had sent Him to do. So focused and committed was Jesus on this work that He could say in John 17:4,

“I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.”

And just what was the thrust of this work that the Father had for His Son to do? We read in Mark 10:45 the words of Jesus,

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

The character of Jesus here is a commitment to serve. And this quality is found in the life of Luke. In Paul’s description of Luke in our text we read that he is the ***“beloved physician.”*** Actually, the text literally reads, “Luke, the physician, the beloved.” Let me share with you a few things we ought to know about Luke. Luke was a gentile and as such has the unique distinction of being the only New Testament writer who was not a Jew. We have no record of his coming to Christ and it would seem then that he came to know the saving power of the cross as an adult, as a practitioner of medicine. Like the medical profession of our day, to be a physician in the days of the New Testament required a high degree of intellectual competence. Luke was like Paul in that he was a learned man. But Luke would present himself as anything but arrogant with knowledge. In fact, Luke never mentions himself by name in either his Gospel account or in the book of Acts. Luke never sought to draw attention to himself but rather to his Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke’s commitment then is seen in his desire to make Jesus Christ known. I don’t want to get into this text too deeply yet, but in Acts 1 we see Luke’s heart and commitment to proclaim the person and work of Christ as in verse one he wrote: ***“The first account I composed [the gospel of Luke], Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach...”*** The

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commitment of Luke was to speak of all that Jesus began to do and teach. Is that your commitment? It does not matter your profession, you may be a theologian like Paul, a physician like Luke, a fisherman like Peter, an accountant like Matthew (how is that for taming it down?), or a homemaker like Martha; but regardless of your profession, do you see yourself called to make Jesus known? It has been said that a minister sees men at their best; a lawyer sees men at their worst; and a doctor sees men as they are. Luke saw men and loved them all. Regardless of your profession, will you see people and simply seek to love them enough to know Christ and make Him known!

Luke's commitment is also seen in his desire to be of service to the people of God, the church. This is most readily apparent in his association with Paul. We know that Paul was not always a well man. In Galatians 4:13, Paul references that fact that he suffered from a bodily illness. This was around 50 AD and it is shortly after this, while Paul was in Troas, that Luke, the physician, appears. It would appear that Luke spent part of his time ministering to Paul, keeping him as healthy as possible to make the journeys necessary for spreading the gospel. This reminds me of the commitment and passion of George Whitefield, the great preacher and evangelist of the 1700s.

The life of Whitefield was marked by an unquenchable zeal and commitment for God's word and the power of the Gospel of Jesus to transform lives. It is estimated that from the time of his ordination (at the age of 21 in 1735) to the day of his death (at the age of 56 in 1770) that Whitefield preached between 40 and 60 hours each week (actual preaching time!). Outside of travelling time, having made 7 different trips to America, and 13 to Scotland being based out of London most of his life, he literally preached, prayed, counseled people, and administrated ministry almost every waking hour of his life. He woke up at 4 am every morning and spent the first hour in prayer and devotion, and he was usually either preaching or on the road to his preaching assignment of the day by 6 or 7am. He burned out (literally) at the age of 56 after redeeming every single moment of his life in preaching the gospel.

While he is famously known as the catalyst for the Great Awakening in America, which started about 1739 and ran for a few years, what is often not realized is the fact that Whitefield was only 24 years old when he arrived on that first visit to America. He preached to tens of thousands and was used by God to ignite revival throughout the nation at the age of 25.

Immediately after his ordination at 21, Whitefield became the highest sought after preacher of his generation. He transformed preaching as we know it. He inherited a preaching style that encompassed simple, dry exposition of the Scriptures, but his personal preaching was marked with zeal, energy, and passion. Whitefield was the pioneer of open-air preaching, and without equal among the English reformers of the 18th century. He was the heartbeat and leading voice of a generation of ministers who led the greatest revival in the history of the English-speaking world. It is said that by the time of his death, long before the invention of sound-modifiers or tape recordings, that he had preached to more people in his lifetime than anyone in the history of mankind. His final sermons were preached only hours before he died. When he was told he needed to rest more because he was so near death Whitefield responded “I'd rather wear out than rust out.”

No doubt that this attitude of Whitefield was obtained from Paul. Listen to Paul's account in Philippians 1:12-22

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12 Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, 13 so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 14 and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. 15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; 16 the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; 17 the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, 20 according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose.

Paul would rather wear out than rust out! But I dare say that it was Luke, the beloved physician, who came along side of Paul and kept him well oiled to continue as long as he did. To whom are you a Luke, coming along side to encourage and enable that other brother or sister in Christ to keep going?

But Luke's commitment was not only to Paul, but also to the church at large. How did this gentile believer, coming to faith in Christ later in life, impact the church at large? You already know and it is amazing profound. Luke gave to the church what is often called the loveliest of the gospel accounts as well as the history of the early church in his two-volume Luke-Acts. Have you ever wondered, particularly with the Gospel of Luke and the first chapters of Acts where events that Luke never saw or experienced were investigated, how Luke came to know and report these things? I believe that while Paul was here in house arrest in Rome, between 60-62 AD, that we find Luke with Paul, that these two men discussed in depth and at length the Word of God. In the course of time, friends and disciples from Jerusalem came to see Paul, men like Mark, the Jew who saw Jesus in the garden and who was a close friend of the apostle Peter. Can you imagine the conversations between Paul, Mark and Luke? As Luke heard the accounts of Jesus, this compassionate physician became the careful historian and chronicled the events. And some time shortly after, if not along with the letters of Paul to the Ephesians, the Colossians, the Philippians and to Philemon came this history of Jesus from the time of His birth on through to Paul's being taken to Rome for preaching the glories of the work of Christ. The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts stand as testimonies of Luke's commitment to know and make know the person and work of Jesus for the benefit of the church.

And by way of application then, let me ask you, what contributions are you seeking to make for the benefit of the church, of God's people, to your brothers and sisters in Christ? You may never write a book. You may never travel thousands of miles with a missionary. But know this beloved, you can, with the grace and gifts God has given you, make an impact upon the body of Christ. What ministries or service can you involve yourself with to aid the body of Christ? What is keeping you from finding that place of service?

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I know that one of the things that often keeps us from finding places of service is that of ignorance. We are ignorant of what needs to be done or consider ourselves too ignorant to know how something ought to be done. Is this not true? When the preacher says, “Be involved, be engaged!” Do you not some of you ask yourself, “What is there that I can do?” Or, “What is there that I can do?” We rarely like to be considered as ignorant people in general. Beloved, educate yourself! Seek out, investigate, find your place or places of service among the people of God. Certainly the leadership of the church is to guide you; certainly other believers can give you direction; but you must be intentional not to be ignorant of what you can do in the service of God’s people. There is no glory given to God by remaining ignorant.

Another reason that often keeps us from finding places of regular service to God and His people is that of busyness. We live busy lives. We fill our moments with so many things from the most noble to the most ignoble. We tend to our physical bodies, we tend to our spiritual well-being; we work, we play, we keep on the move. Let me make to you a radical statement; one that you have heard before, but hear it again. If you are too busy to serve the people of God, then you are too busy. You need to rethink, re-evaluate and re-work your schedule. Find a way to serve the body of Christ. Luke gave up his promising practice as a doctor to follow the footsteps of a man whose life was in constant danger all for the sake of the gospel to evangelize the lost and edify the saints. What do you need to give up so that you might have time to evangelize the lost and edify the saints? Again, I am not asking you to be a missionary to Africa, but am asking you to be intentional in your service to God and His people even as Luke was. With regard to service to the Lord and to His people, is it your commitment to say along with Whitefield, “*I’d rather wear out than rust out.*”

One of the men in the church posted on Facebook that “*Facebook proves people have time to read their bible and pray...*” What do you need to give up or at least tweak in order to be all you can be for service to God and to God’s people? Luke was regarded as beloved, that is an intimate friend in matters physical and spiritual. Luke was regarded as a fellow-worker; a comrade in arms with Paul. And Luke was regarded as a faithful friend, willing to stick it out through thick and thin. These are the Christlike qualities of commitment. Let us pray for such qualities in our lives.

Soli Deo Gloria

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