

Gospel Prime – The Preeminence of Christ in Colossians

Gospel Growth: Evidences of Grace (Colossians 1:1-14)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on September 29, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're beginning a new sermon series through the book of Colossians. We're calling it "Gospel Prime" because whatever is *prime* is "of first importance". That's one of the clearest things in Colossians – the gospel of Christ is of first importance. **There's a particular emphasis in this letter on the preeminence of Christ.** Paul states in chapter 1:18 that Christ "*is the head of the body, the church, He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.*" That he might be supreme, foremost, of first importance.
 - Why is this so? Why is Paul stressing the supremacy of Christ – his preeminence, his first-ness? **Because there was a form of false teaching creeping into the church that was distorting, disparaging, and diminishing the significance of Christ and his accomplished work of redemption.**

- ❖ Like in most of his letters addressed to a church, Paul's reason for writing had to do with false teaching. **There has never been an idyllic age of the church when everything went right, everyone got along, and there were no issues.** Even in the early church, there were problems. Sometimes coming from outside oppression, but most often, the trouble came from within – from teachers within the church who began distorting the truth and promoting false doctrine.
 - That was the case in Colossians. Now, over the years, there's been a lot of ink spilled by commentators, trying to identify the false teaching with something familiar to historians. Possibly an early form of pagan Gnosticism or Jewish mysticism. In the end, there's not enough evidence to nail it down to this or that particular cult or religion. Now when we get to chapter 2, Paul will address, more directly, what was being taught.
 - **But for now, the thing to understand is that the form of false teaching in Colossian left believers feeling inadequate and incomplete in their faith until they adopted the system of spirituality promoted by these teachers.** What really bothered Paul is how this teaching had very little to do with Christ.

- ❖ Here's a simple way to think about it. The false teachers were saying, "Sure, you've got faith in Christ. You're *in Christ* – you're united with him by faith. That's good. But it's not enough. If you want to experience the fullness of God – a deeper intimacy and closeness with the Lord – then you need more than just being *in Christ*."
 - There's a whole system of spirituality you have to follow. There are certain regulations to observe, having to do with dietary restrictions and festival observances. If you look in chapter 2:16, Paul says these false teachers were passing judgment, and according to v18, their judgment is that the Colossian believers are disqualified. **They're saying, "You're not making the cut unless you're abiding by our system of spirituality."**
 - So you can see how distressing this can be for a church. You're taught, in the beginning, about the gospel and how it's all about Christ and his sufficiency. But now you're hearing people say, "That's a good starting point. But if you want to really experience the fullness of God, then you need to listen to this teacher. You need to read this book. You need to follow this particular system of spirituality. **Whatever it is – it's pointing to something beyond Christ and the gospel – and saying you need *that* to be spiritually complete.**"

- ❖ This was causing great distress among the Colossian believers. They were feeling spiritually inadequate. As if their experience of God was incomplete and missing something.
 - **This is why, throughout his letter, Paul makes a point of stressing that the fullness of God is found in Christ (1:19; 2:9).** And how, as believers, we've been filled in Christ (2:10) and raised with Christ, so that we are now seated with Christ at the right hand of God (3:1). Our lives are now hidden with Christ in God (3:3).
 - **You can see how he's trying to stress the completeness and fullness of our salvation in Christ alone.** You have all you need in Jesus. Because he's preeminent. He's prime. He's of first importance.

- ❖ So as we begin this study of Colossians, it's important to get a grasp of why he's writing. What's the situation that Paul is addressing? **He's trying to encourage those who are struggling with feelings of spiritual inadequacy.**
 - What a fitting message for us. Many of us are dealing with similar feelings. We feel like we're not Christian enough. We feel like we haven't done enough or we don't know enough. We feel like something's missing, something's incomplete. Those are feelings of spiritual inadequacy.
 - What I want to show you this morning – looking just at Paul's introduction – are **three ways to address your feelings of spiritual inadequacy:** (1) Make a habit of celebrating any evidence of gospel growth. (2) Make a practice of praying for greater gospel growth. (3) Make a point of reminding yourself of gospel grace.

Make a Habit of Celebrating Any Evidence of Gospel Growth

- ❖ The first way to address feelings of spiritual inadequacy is to **make a habit of celebrating any evidence of gospel growth.** That means having the sense to recognize and give thanks when you come across any evidence of God's grace bearing fruit in your life or in those around you. That's essentially what Paul is doing for the Colossians here in vv3-8.

- ❖ **Now unlike many of the other churches that Paul writes to, he didn't plant the church at Colossae, and he actually has yet to visit them.** He mentions that in chapter 2:1. They've never seen each other face to face. But he has heard a report about them. It came from Epaphras, the minister who planted the church. Paul says this in v7. He mentions the brother again at the end of the letter, and we learn there that Epaphras planted two other churches in the Lycus Valley (western Turkey), one in Laodicea and another in Hierapolis (4:13).
 - Epaphras is a busy guy. He recently visited Paul and shared about the health of the church. Now where was Paul when he received this report and when he wrote this letter? According to chapter 4:2, he was in prison (cf. 4:18). The two most likely places is either in Rome or Ephesus. It's not clear exactly where.
 - In this report, Paul learns about the false teaching going around the church. He's clearly going to address it, but he begins with a few words of thanksgiving. He's thanking God for how the Colossians received the gospel. **He's trying to encourage them and to remind them of the truth of the gospel by reflecting on the fruit that it has borne in their lives.**

- ❖ In vv3-5, Paul identifies three fruits of gospel growth. “³*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.*”
 - Notice the three fruits of gospel growth that he highlights: More faith, more love, and more hope. Three cardinal virtues of the Christian faith (cf. 1 Thess 1:3; 1 Cor 13:13). Is the Colossian church perfect? Of course not. Do they have problems? They sure do – like every other church that has ever existed. But if it’s a true church grounded in the gospel and filled with the Spirit, then there will eventually be fruit – no matter how small.

- ❖ An amateur gardener – or a complete novice like me – will tend to give up on a plant much quicker than an expert. We don’t see the flowers or fruit we expected, and we’re ready to toss out the pot. **But the experienced gardener is patient and has the eyes to look beyond the obvious and see (and appreciate) the subtle signs of life and fruitfulness.** The experienced gardener will continue to care for and tend to the plant, being thankful for any evidence of growth.
 - Paul is like that gardener. He’s not giving up too quickly on the Colossian church. He’s going to celebrate and be thankful for any evidence of growth. And what he sees, in this report from Epaphras, is that – in spite of the growing controversy over the false teaching – this nascent church is growing in greater faith in Christ Jesus; in greater love for all the saints, and in greater hope for their inheritance in heaven.
 - These virtues are the fruits of growth. Now notice the roots of growth – It’s the gospel. **The virtues are the fruit; the gospel is the root.**

- ❖ Look at v5, “*Of this (hope laid up for you in heaven) you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, ⁷just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant.*”
 - **So there’s a message, with verbal content, that can be proclaimed by some and heard or learned by others.** We see in these verses that it’s called “*the word of truth*” or “*the grace of God in truth*”. Or it’s just known as “*the gospel*”, the good news. **It’s good news about the grace and truth of God in the person of Christ Jesus.** Who died for the hopeless – for sinners like us – to give hope, to secure an inheritance in heaven. Really, to share his own inheritance. Our hope in heaven is rooted in Christ in the gospel.

- ❖ And according to this good news, before we reach heaven, while we live in the present – Jesus gives us the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it (Eph 1:14). **That means if you share in this hope and you’re sealed with the Spirit, then the fruit of the Spirit will inevitably bear forth in your life.** That’s the kind of spiritual fruit an experienced gardener like Paul can detect, no matter how small.
 - So we see him, in v6, celebrating any evidence of gospel growth. Thanking God for how the gospel is “*bearing fruit and increasing*” among the Colossians and indeed in the whole world. Notice how Paul has made a real habit of doing this. Back in v3 he says he’s *always* doing this – always thanking God for any gospel growth that he sees – in the churches he works with or on the mission field as the gospel goes out to the world.

- ❖ Friends, do we see things in the same way as Paul? He seems to always be looking at things through gospel lenses. Always looking for evidence of grace. Ask yourself: Do I do the same? **Do I look for evidence of gospel grace and growth in others?** Do I draw attention to it? Do I give thanks for it?
 - **Or am I more known for pointing out people’s faults?** For identifying problems in my church or my small group? Am I always focused on what’s wrong in the world? What better characterizes me – having a spirit of criticalness or a spirit of gratitude?

- ❖ Let’s make a habit of looking for evidences of gospel growth in others and celebrating whatever fruit you find. **And the more you start looking at life and looking at others that way – it’ll reshape the way you look at yourself and your own spirituality.** It will address any feelings of spiritual inadequacy that you might be dealing with.
 - If, for whatever reason, you’re feeling spiritually incomplete, then ask God to give you clearer eyes to see what his Spirit is doing. This is what you should pray, *“Lord, help me to see the evidence of your grace in my life – if just in my heart right now. I believe your gospel is bearing fruit and increasing – because that’s the nature of the gospel. It’s like a grain of mustard seed that will grow up to become a tree, big enough for the birds of the air to make nests in its branches (Lk 13:19). That’s how fruitful the gospel is. **But for now Lord, open my eyes see the subtle signs of spiritual life and fruitfulness. Help me see the buds on the branches, even before the flowers bloom.**”* Ask for those eyes.

Make a Practice of Praying for Greater Gospel Growth

- ❖ So that’s the first way to address any feelings of spiritual inadequacy – make a habit of celebrating gospel growth. Here’s the second way: **Make a practice of praying for greater gospel growth.** The thanksgiving section in vv3-8 is typical of most ancient letters that begin that way and often include an invocation of blessing for the recipient(s). Paul follows that pattern here in vv9-14. This is a prayer for the Colossians that arises out of Paul’s thankfulness for the gospel fruit already evident, and now he prays for them to increase in fruitfulness.

- ❖ Look at v9, *“And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”* So Paul has made a practice out of praying for gospel growth. He says he has not ceased to pray this way. Now he begins by asking for a filling of the knowledge of God’s will. **He prays, on behalf of the Colossians, for fullness of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. So it seems that Paul is particularly concerned with how they think.**
 - This would suggest that Christianity can’t be treated as a mere religious experience. Many people claim to be Christian because that’s their upbringing. They’ve had religious experiences in the church. Or they base their Christianity on religious feelings they’d had in a worship service or at some event.
 - Which explains why many Christians are susceptible to feelings of spiritual inadequacy. Their faith is not firmly grounded in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. They don’t have that solid foundation.

- ❖ **It's telling that the very first thing Paul prays for is for their knowledge of God's will to increase.** It tells us that if you want to address the heart and feelings of inadequacy, then you can't bypass the mind and thoughts about God and his will.
 - This is why, at our church, we prioritize our teaching ministries. Now we care about the heart and dealing with heart issues, but we realize, from Scripture, that you get to those issues through the mind. Through holding every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Through renewing the mind in order to discern God's will (Rom 12:2).

- ❖ **This is why we've preserved traditional Sunday School courses.** In most churches, Sunday School is a dinosaur. It's gone extinct. It's been replaced by something centered more on community building. There's nothing wrong with that. But at the same time, there is something special about devoting an hour of your Sunday morning to shape your thinking by the Word – to deepen your knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.
 - **If participating in Sunday School is not a habit for you, then today is a great day to start. I encourage you to visit one of our classes after service.** If the first thing Paul prays for is for fullness of the knowledge of God's will, then in what ways are you actively seeking to fill yourself?

- ❖ But now, having said that, I don't want you to think that all Paul cares about is to be filled with information. If that's the case, then why is this concern for knowledge communicated in the form of a prayer and not just in an exhortation to get into the Word? **It's because he's not just praying for them to be filled with knowledge – with information – but to be filled with the Spirit of wisdom and knowledge.** We can draw this inference when we compare v9 with a similar prayer of Paul's found in Ephesians 1:17.
 - There's a strong parallel in many passages between Colossians and Ephesians. It's why most commentators think that the two letters were written around the same time. It explains the overlap.
 - Well, in **Ephesians 1:17**, Paul similarly said he heard about their faith in Jesus and their love toward all the saints, which is why he does not cease to give thanks for them, praying, *“that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.”*

- ❖ The point is that we need the Spirit if we expect to be filled with spiritual knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. **Just cramming more Bible into our minds will accomplish very little if the Spirit is not present to give us wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.**
 - What this means is that every time you're about to engage the Word – right before the sermon as the preacher ascends the pulpit; right when you sit down in Sunday School, right before you step into Bible study; right as you start your devotions – **make a practice of praying for greater gospel growth by asking for the Spirit's filling and help.** Memorize Colossians 1:9-10 and use that as your prayer.

- ❖ Now if we keep reading in v10, Paul explains the purpose for being filled with the knowledge of God's will. "*So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.*" So it's all for the purpose of living a life pleasing to God. We can't stress enough how learning sound doctrine is never an end in itself. **Sound thinking about God should lead to sound living for God.**
 - Notice how Paul uses the language of worthiness – walking (another way to say living) in a manner "*worthy of the Lord*". It's intentional that he raises the issue of worthiness or adequacy. Because that's the presenting issue raised by the false teachers. They're passing judgment on the Colossians, deeming them disqualified or unworthy. So Paul goes on to describe what kind of life is worthy – the kind of life that pleases the Lord.
- ❖ **In vv10-12, there are four modifiers describing a worthy walk that pleases God.** This pleasing kind of walk is characterized (1) "*by bearing fruit in every good work*" and (2) "*increasing in the knowledge of God*" (1:10). **Clearly there's no contradiction or competition between developing your theology and doing good works.**
 - For some reason we like to pigeonhole churches or individuals as being known for strong teaching and theology. While others are known for being active in the community, doing works of justice and mercy. And we assume you're pretty much one or the other.
 - But Paul won't allow such a bifurcation. He says it starts with being filled with spiritual knowledge, growing in theology. Which leads to bearing more fruit doing good works. Which leads to increasing knowledge of God. So it's all connected.
- ❖ If you look back in v11, Paul gives the last two modifiers describing this worthy kind of life. It's a walk characterized (3) "*by being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy*" and by (4) "*giving thanks to the Father.*"
 - Friends, this is the kind of walk that is worthy of the Lord – that's going to fully please him. So if you're dealing with feelings of spiritual inadequacy – if you feel incomplete in your faith – then this is what you should be praying for. Make a practice of praying for greater gospel growth.

Make a Point of Reminding Yourself of Gospel Grace

- ❖ But as you pray for gospel growth – as you strive, with the Spirit's help, to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord – the most important thing is to remember that you are already complete in Christ. **We should pray from the posture of having already been qualified – made adequate – by God's grace.** This leads to our third way to address spiritual inadequacy: **Make a point of reminding yourself of gospel grace.**
- ❖ After describing the worthy life as one characterized by "*giving thanks to the Father*" in v12, Paul makes a point of reminding the Colossians of the grace of God they received in the gospel. **Contrary to the false teachers who made you feel incomplete until you adopted their system of spirituality, Paul's burden is to remind the believers that they are already complete in Christ.** That they are already citizens of heaven, seated with Christ in the heavenly places.

- ❖ Listen to his recounting of the gospel and for the three things God has accomplished for every believer. V12, “¹²*giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”*
- ❖ **Do you hear the completeness – the already-ness of your salvation – in those verses?** You’ve been qualified, delivered, transferred. If you’re a Christian – if you’ve turned away from your sins and trusted in Christ for salvation – then you already are *qualified* to share in the heavenly inheritance of light. Because God has *delivered* you from the domain of darkness and *transferred* you into the kingdom of his beloved Son.
 - It’s in light of these accomplished realities that you are to pray for greater gospel growth and strive to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord. **You’re *not* walking towards an uncertain verdict** – waiting for a judgment of whether or not you’re worthy and qualified. **No, you’re walking the Christian life away from a decisive verdict already handed down** – one that calls you qualified in Christ. That makes all the difference.
- ❖ Think about all those talent shows on television these days. **Just think about the pressure, the anxiety, the fear that grips those performers every time they take the stage.** Their performance is directed towards an uncertain verdict. They don’t know if they’ll qualify, if they’re worthy. It’s no wonder if they struggle with feelings of inadequacy.
 - But imagine after the verdict is in – after they’ve qualified to move on – if that same performer is now asked to sing that song or dance that routine again – the technical challenges are still the same – but now the pressure is gone and replaced by the sheer pleasure of performing. **It makes all the difference when you’re no longer walking towards an uncertain verdict but away from one that says, “You’re qualified!”**
- ❖ One of my favorite stories is David and Goliath. **You’re probably familiar with their epic showdown, but I want to draw attention to what happened afterwards.** Imagine you were in the army of Israel. Now before the battle begins, you’re understandably nervous. You’ve got to fight the Philistine army, and they’ve got a giant on their side! You’re feeling rather inadequate.
 - But then you’re told someone has volunteered to be Israel’s champion. In ancient times, battles were sometimes decided by both sides sending a champion to fight as a representative substitute. **If your champion wins, his victory is a victory for all of you.** But if your champion loses, his defeat is your defeat. That how it works.
- ❖ Now when you see your champion step onto the battlefield – a shepherd boy without any armor and armed with only a slingshot – you’re not feeling any better. Up against a giant, the odds don’t look good. **But when the dust clears, it’s your champion standing victorious.**
 - Suddenly there’s a resounding shout of victory on your side. Trumpets blare and a battle cry is issued. You go rushing down into the valley in hot pursuit of a retreating army.
 - Now the victory is won. The enemy is defeated. But they’re still going to put up a fight. You still need to subdue them. So they’ll be some smaller skirmishes you’ll have to face. You still might get a few wounds. It won’t be a cakewalk.

- ❖ **But it's a very different experience walking through battle towards an uncertain victory versus walking through battle from a decisive victory.** Do you see the difference it makes to run into battle, right into the thick of things, knowing that your champion has won and the victory is already yours?
- ❖ That's what is Paul getting at here in vv12-14. Later in **chapter 2:14**, he's going to unpack the gospel even more and describe God as "*canceling the record of debt (created by our sin) that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*"
 - Do you hear that? **The legal demands calling for our punishment have been lifted.** Because our debt was placed on Christ, and together they were nailed to the cross. So now the verdict is in. We're deemed adequate. We're counted as qualified in Christ.
- ❖ Listen to **chapter 2:15**, "[God] *disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [Christ].*" Like David, Jesus volunteered to be our champion. **And like David, Jesus disarmed his enemy and put him to open shame, defeating him with his own weapon. By death, he defeated Death and the Devil.** He's triumphant!
 - Now if you place your faith in Jesus, if you join him and stand on his side, then his victory is counted as yours. You'll be redeemed. Your sins will be forgiven. You'll be delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of light. And then you begin your walk.
 - **It makes all the difference when you're no longer trying to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord *towards* an uncertain verdict – but rather away from one that decisively says, "You're qualified!"**
- ❖ Church, this is why we will never tire from rehearsing the glorious truths of the gospel every Lord's Day. Every time we gather. Because we'll all go through weeks or even seasons where we feel very incomplete and spiritually inadequate. That's why we make a point of remembering the grace of God in the gospel.