

Sermon Outline

THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD

OUR PLACE IN THE SON: THE AWESOME AND INESCAPABLE CENTRALITY OF JESUS CHRIST (COLOSSIANS 1:15-17)

I. Introduction

II. The Christ-Exalting Purpose of Colossians

- A. Paul's letter to the Colossian Christians is a grand proclamation of the supremacy of Christ over all spiritual powers, religious traditions, and life philosophies.
- B. The purpose of this letter is to remind Christians that Christ is sufficient for a relationship with God and protection from evil.
- C. The Colossians were faced a religious teaching that questioned the sufficiency of Christ.
 1. It was a teaching of *legalistic asceticism* (Col 2:16-23).
 - It required additional practices to bring one closer to God.
 2. It was a teaching of *mysticism* (Col 2:18).
 - It required further practices to protect one from evil spiritual powers.
- D. Paul writes to teach that Christ alone is enough for all their needs.
 - If we want to be accepted by God and protected from bad spiritual powers, we do not need to engage in magical practices at all. We need only to trust and rest on Christ.
- E. To encourage the Colossian Christians to deeper faith in Christ, Paul proceeds to preach the supremacy of Christ to them.
- F. While the whole letter to the Colossians is an extended teaching about Christ's supremacy, the section that focuses on this truth is 1:15-20.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Why is the purpose of Paul's letter to the Colossian Church? (2) What kind of religious teachings troubled the Colossian Christians? How are these kinds of teachings alive and well in society today?

III. Christ, the Image of God and the Firstborn One (Colossians 1:15)

- A. Paul says that Christ is “the image of the invisible God.”
1. An image is a figure or a likeness of something.
 2. To say that Christ is the image of the invisible God means that he is the visible representation of God himself.
 3. What are the implications for the Colossians?
 - a. If Christ is the visible image of God, it means that no one represents God as accurately or comprehensively as Christ.
 - b. If we desire to know God, and be accepted by him, we do not need mystical practices.
—We need to sit at the feet of Christ and learn from him.
 4. This same truth is in Hebrews 1:3: Christ “is the *radiance* of the glory of God and the *exact imprint* of his nature...”
 5. Thus, to call Christ “the image” is not to demean him—it is to show that Christ is the equal of God the Father himself.
- B. Paul says that Christ is “the firstborn of all creation.”
1. Some have taken “firstborn” to mean “first created.”
 2. But “firstborn” can also mean “first in importance,” “preeminent,” or “supreme.”
 3. Firstborn = Preeminent is most likely the meaning here.
 4. The basis of the “firstborn” terminology in Colossians 1:15 may be Psalm 89:27: “And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.”
 5. Paul is using “firstborn” in the sense of Psalm 89:27 uses it:
—He means that Christ Jesus is the special one whom YHWH has exalted to firstborn status.
- C. Because Christ is the image of the invisible God and the Firstborn of all creation, the Colossian Church must rest on Christ alone.
- D. This same message is what many Christians in our own culture need to hear.
1. It can take awhile for the Gospel to reshape our cultural values and ways.
 2. Some Christians from traditional Chinese backgrounds may still feel the weight of old superstitious customs.
 3. But God has the same word for us: The One in whom we have placed our hope is none other than “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What does it mean to say that Christ is “the image of the invisible God”? (2) What does Paul mean when he calls Christ, “Firstborn of all creation”? Does he mean that Christ is God’s first creation? (3) Where in Scripture did Paul get his “firstborn” terminology? (4) Why is it important that people in our culture understand that Christ is the image of the invisible God and the firstborn of all creation?

IV. Christ, the Agent of the Creator (Colossians 1:16)

- A. In verse 16, Paul explains why Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” and “the firstborn of all creation.”
1. It is because “by him all things were created.”
 2. It is precisely that Christ is the agent of creation that we cannot understand “firstborn” to mean “first created.”
- Christ himself was the *agent* through whom God the Father made the whole universe!
- B. This same truth comes out in 1 Corinthians 8:6:
—“...one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through whom* are all things and *through whom* we exist.”

***Questions for reflection:** (1) Based on verse 16, why does Paul call Jesus “the image of the invisible God” and “the firstborn of all creation”? (2) Why does verse 16 show us that “firstborn” cannot mean “first created”?

V. A Look at the “All Things” (Colossians 1:16)

- A. After saying, “by him all things were created,” Paul wants to ensure that Christians know exactly how far and wide “all things” extends. *Just what is included in “all things”?*
- B. In the rest of verse 16, Paul spells out what “all things” includes by way of three categories.
- C. The first category is “in heaven and on earth.”
1. This encompasses the whole spiritual realm and the earthly universe.
 2. Heaven is...
 - a. The throne chamber of the triune God.
 - b. The home of the angelic host: seraphim, cherubim, archangels, and angels.
 - c. The home of the Church of Jesus Christ.
 3. Earth is...
 - a. The home of the human race and the animal kingdom.
 - b. The realm of luscious vegetation, rushing rivers, and majestic seas and mountains.
 - c. The future dwelling place of God and his holy ones (Rev 5:10).
 4. However, “in heaven and on earth” also encompasses everything else in-between these two realms.
 - a. 2 Corinthians 12:2 suggests there are actually three heavenly realms.
 - b. Ephesians 2:6 teaches that the heavenly places are the home of God and Christ.
 - c. But Ephesians 6:12 teaches also that evil cosmic powers reside “in the heavenly places.”

- d. These data give us a way of understanding the three heavens:
 - i. The first heaven is most likely our sky and space.
 - ii. The third (and highest) heaven is where God’s throne is.
 - ii. The second heaven is the realm of darkness, where evil powers dwell, while they wait for destruction.
 - e. “Heaven and earth” also includes the heavenly realm where these dark powers dwell.
 - 5. Thus, “in heaven and on earth” represents the whole of creation; all of life, whether physical or spiritual, good or evil.
 - 6. The implications of this for the Colossians and us are clear:
 - If all life was made through Christ, we do not need any other spiritual powers to help us out. We can continue to rest on Jesus alone for everything that we need.
- D. The second category is “visible and invisible.”
- 1. This corresponds to “heaven and earth.”
 - 2. It is yet another way of talking about the spiritual and earthly realities.
 - 3. “Visible” refers to things that are earthly; things that can be detected by earthly technologies.
 - 4. “Invisible” refers to the spiritual realm—the heavens.
 - 5. Again, the implications are clear:
 - Since all life, whether visible or invisible, spiritual or earthly, was made through Christ, Christians can continue to depend on him alone for everything that we need. There is no need to worship other spiritual powers, or rely on our own good works.
- E. In we still do not get it, Paul gets more detailed—he starts naming names!
- 1. Who are these mysterious beings or institutions that Paul is talking about?
 - a. Paul is talking about persons or institutions of power.
 - b. Paul is talking about both invisible and visible, heavenly and earthly power figures.
 - 2. The thrones (*thronoi*) are seats of power, centers of authority.
 - 3. The dominions (*kuriotētes*) are the realms over which these thrones rule.
 - 4. The rulers (*archai*) are those persons who occupy the thrones.
 - 5. The powers (*exousiai*) are the systems of recognitions, rules, rewards, and punishments that keep a ruler or a throne in power.
- F. But what is Paul’s point in giving those names?
- Since these heavenly and earthly powers are themselves creations of Christ, there is no reason for us to fear them, love them, or serve them over him.
- G. In the end, “all things were created *through* him and *for* him.”

***Questions for reflection:** (1) What is included in “all things”? (2) What does the category “heaven and earth:” include? (3) Who are the thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers? Are they good or evil? Are they only earthly or only spiritual?

VI. Christ, the Eternal, All-Encompassing One (Colossians 1:17)

- A. One way of looking at verse 17 is to see them as a summary of verse 16.
- B. Because Christ is the divine Agent through whom all things were made, Christ is “before all things.”
- C. Because all creation was made for him, Christ is also the One who gives all these things their meaning and sustenance—“in him all things hold together.”
- D. The words, “in him all things hold together” means...
 - 1. that all things are sustained and preserved by the Son of God (Heb 1:3).
 - 2. that all things derive their purpose from the Son of God.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How should we understand verse 17? (2) What does it mean to say that Christ is “before all things”? (3) What is meant by “in him all things hold together”?

VII. The Awesome and Inescapable Centrality of Jesus Christ

- A. Coming to Colossians 1:15-17 is like coming to the throne of God’s glory!
- B. The reason we need not and may not fear evil spiritual powers, or find other ways to earn God’s acceptance, or worship other earthly and spiritual authorities is simply this—*Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord is more than enough for us!*
- C. The whole of creation is a gift from God the Father to the eternal Son!
- D. Therefore, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Firstborn of YHWH, is the heart and the meaning of all history, of all time and space!

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How has Paul made the case that we need not fear evil spiritual powers, or find other paths to earn God’s favor? (2) “The whole of creation is a gift from God the Father to the eternal Son!” Discuss.

VIII. Getting the World’s Story Right—and Christ-Centered

Since Christ Jesus is the beginning and end of all creation, we need to do what the apostle Paul has done. *We need to help people get the story of the world right.* We need to tell the story of the world with Christ as the centerpiece; with Christ as beginning, present, and end. This is at the heart of evangelization, the spread of the Good News of Christ our Savior.

- A. In Colossians 1:15-17, Paul has given the Colossian Christians a radically new way of understanding their world and universe.
 - 1. He shows that Christ is the creator, preserver, and destiny of all creation.
 - 2. He draws out the implication—we must therefore trust in Christ alone.

- B. This is a God-inspired model for Christian discipleship.
 - 1. We too need to help others see the world as it truly is, a Christ-sustained, Christ-centered universe.
 - 2. Evangelization is about helping people see themselves in light of God’s true story of the world.

- C. How do we do help people see themselves in light of God’s true story?
 - 1. We *present* to people the inescapable Truth of Colossians 1:15-17.
 - 2. We *challenge* the histories that people receive from their authorities. —The Colossians would have heard in Colossians 1:15-17 a challenge to the inflated, near-religious authority of Caesar, the self-proclaimed savior of the world.
 - 3. We *call* people to live by a new story, the story that is in Christ Jesus.
 - a. This means rejecting the myths that the world teaches us:
 - i. The We-Are-Beyond-Religion myth
 - ii. The My-Work-Is-Me myth
 - iii. The I-Can-Decide-My-Own-Goodness myth
 - b. This means receiving from Christ our salvation, dignity, and purpose.
 - c. This means making the Kingdom of God our chief end in life.

***Questions for reflection:** (1) How does Colossians 1:15-17 give the Colossians a new way of understanding their world? (2) How is Colossians 1:15-17 an example for our own evangelistic work? (3) What is involved in helping people to see themselves in light of God’s true story? (4) What are three ungodly myths people live by? What other myths do you know of? How will you proclaim Christ’s glory against those myths?