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St. Matthew's Anglican Church

Lapeer, MI

**“On Guard: Finding Strength in an Ever-Weakening World”**

**Part 2 of 4 – Colossians 1:15-28**

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## SERMON OUTLINE

- I. Introduction
  - A. The Hymn to Christ (Col 1:15-20)
  - B. The Person and Work of Christ
  
- II. Who is Christ?
  - A. Common Misperceptions
  - B. He is God.
  - C. He is the firstborn of creation.
  - D. He is supreme over creation.
  - E. He is the head of the church.
  - F. He is the firstborn from the dead.
  
- III. What Has Christ Done for Us?
  - A. Reading of Col 1:21-23
  - B. Being Reconciled
  - C. The Alienated and Hostile Mind
  - D. From Evil and Darkness to Sainthood
  - E. Excursus: 2 Tim 2:11-13
  - F. Denial, Faith, and Faithfulness
  - G. When We Doubt
  
- IV. The Response of the Church
  - A. Reading of Col 1:24-28
  - B. The Afflictions of Christ
  - C. Ambassadors for Christ
  - D. The Goal of Reconciliation
  
- V. Conclusion: The Purpose of the Church

## **TEXT**

### *Colossians 1:15-28*

<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup>For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. <sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

<sup>21</sup>And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, <sup>22</sup>he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, <sup>23</sup>if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

<sup>24</sup>Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, <sup>25</sup>of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup>the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. <sup>27</sup>To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. <sup>28</sup>Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup>For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

## **PRAYER**

Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you.

It is in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray. Amen.

## SERMON

### *Introduction*

Listen again to Paul's hymn to Christ found in Colossians 1:15-20:

<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of **all** creation. <sup>16</sup>For by him **all** things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—**all** things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>And he is before **all** things, and in him **all** things hold together. <sup>18</sup>And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in **everything** he might be preeminent. <sup>19</sup>For in him **all** the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him to reconcile to himself **all** things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Of all the passages in the New Testament, this is considered by many to be the most majestic description of Christ. Nowhere else will you find a more succinct yet glorious image of the marvelous Savior that we serve. And it is here that we will find further strength in our struggles with this world. We continue today in our series “On Guard: Finding Strength in an Ever-Weakening World.” Last week we focused primarily on such practical issues as prayer, faith, hope, love, bearing fruit, and increasing in our knowledge of God so that we may guard ourselves against the false teachings found both within and without the church. Today we're going to shift our focus somewhat, from our actions to our thinking, though the two are never truly independent of one another.

Still, I want us to consider exactly who Jesus is and perhaps in the process we can also draw strength from how we think about Christ. It's apparent that Paul thought that it mattered, because he interrupts his prayer for the Colossians that we find in the first half of chapter one to focus on the person and work of Christ. For Paul and for us this is a necessary shift, because who Christ is and what he has done forms the basis of all that Paul is telling us to think and do, our theology and our ethics.

### *Who Is Christ?*

The necessary question to ask then is, “Who is Christ?” There are many beliefs about this in today’s world. To many Jews he was just a Rabbi; for Muslims he was a prophet; atheists write him off as a figment of the imagination or at best he was a good, moral teacher. The common threads in these misperceptions are two; they refer to Christ in the past tense, and they reduce Christ to the human level. Neither of these are true, so let’s look at who we as Christians proclaim Christ to be.

The first thing we claim about Jesus is that he is God, yet he is not the Father. Paul states that “he is the image of the invisible God” (15) and that “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (19). Everything that is God dwells in Christ. He is the visible image of the invisible God. Jesus is “the exact and full representation of God in character and [being]. Whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father.”<sup>1</sup>

Where many people, even some Christians go astray is in thinking that Christ is a created being. Even here Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation,” a phrase that if misunderstood could lead us to believe that Christ was the first to be created. But that is not what Paul means nor would his original audience have understood. In Ancient Near Eastern culture the firstborn was a title of authority given to the son who represented his father as head of the family. You may remember that Esau, who was the first from Rebekah’s womb, sold his birthright to his younger twin Jacob, making Jacob the head of the family and the one through whom God’s covenant promises would come to pass (Gen 25:29-34). Throughout Israelite history those kings favored by God, especially David, were referred to as his firstborn. In Psalm

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Letter to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 133.

89:27 “God says of the Davidic king: ‘I also will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.’”<sup>2</sup>

Thus Paul’s claim here is that not only is Christ God in the flesh, he is also supreme over any other power on earth or in heaven. When Paul states that Christ is “before all things” (17), that is a claim both of existence and rank. Christ is both eternal and preeminent. Furthermore, “all things were created through him and for him,” and it is in Christ that our very existence, even the universe itself, is held together (16-17).

Paul then goes on to state that Christ is the head of the church (18), a thought that may seem disconnected to the surrounding verses, but it is not. If all things are created through and for Christ, then obviously the church is one of those things. Yet, we often forget our purpose on the earth. Throughout history the church has become obsessed with its own existence, its own perceived authority, all the while forgetting that it exists by the will of God and to serve Christ for his purposes, primarily to share the Gospel with others. When we take our eyes off of Jesus, we become distracted with the concerns of this world. I am not saying that we should go through our day as if there is nothing wrong with this world, there is, but we must remember that our strength comes from the one who is supreme over this world.

And we must remember how this supremacy was accomplished. Paul says it was done through the resurrection of Christ (18). “Because Christ is the ‘beginning’ and the ‘firstborn’ in resurrection as well as in creation, he has therefore become preeminent in all things.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, because Christ was both fully human and fully divine, he has both conquered sin and death and reconciled us to God. It is through his blood that we can have peace with God,

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<sup>2</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, (Word Biblical Commentary 44. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

which leads us to our next consideration of Christ. In addition to asking “Who is Christ?” we must also ask “What has Christ done for us?”

### *What Has Christ Done for Us*

It is true that Christ has reconciled us to God, but what does that mean? Is Paul stating that all people, regardless of their beliefs, are now reconciled to God and at peace with him.

Let’s read a little farther in our passage to answer these questions. Colossians 1:22-23:

<sup>21</sup>And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, <sup>22</sup>he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, <sup>23</sup>if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Have you ever known someone who’s always been a Christian. I have. My former roommate Bryan married about two months before Elizabeth and I did. Bryan’s wife Julie and I were friends before I ever met Bryan. She was one of the first people I met in the church I attended when I first became a Christian. Julie is one of the nicest people I know. And from what those who grew up with her tell me, she was always that way. I could never imagine Julie doing anything remotely sinful. It seems that she has always been a Christian, and that is what Julie believes. She has no conversion story, because she cannot remember a time in her life when she did not believe in Jesus as her savior. I’ve always been jealous of that. I struggled for years to accept Christ. It wasn’t that God was not beckoning me to come to him. He was. But it seems that I did everything possible to push God away, making excuses, running with the wrong crowd, watching my life become more and more worldly and troubled. I not only put a barrier between me and God, I openly challenged his authority over my life.

That is the kind of person Paul is describing here. However, it doesn’t matter whether you accepted Christ at 4 or 40, the point is that until you do you have no chance to stand before

God on judgment day and be found innocent in his eyes, worthy of spending an eternity in fellowship with him. That is what Christ does for us. He takes us from a world of evil and darkness, one which we are partially responsible for, and he reforms that person into a saint. Because Christ has died for your sins, and because you truly believe that he is the only pathway to eternal life, each and every one of you are saints.

The question is whether or not you believe. That is the loophole that Paul mentions in v. 23. “If you continue in the faith,” Paul says you will be reconciled to God. Some people have used this verse to espouse the idea that you can lose your salvation. I’ve asked this question many times since I became a Christian, and it’s only been recently that I’ve found the answer. Turn with me to 2 Tim. 2. Perhaps we’ll study this whole letter some day, but for now let’s just look at verses 11-13.

<sup>11</sup>The saying is trustworthy, for:  
If we have died with him, we will also live with him;  
<sup>12</sup>if we endure, we will also reign with him;  
if we deny him, he also will deny us;  
<sup>13</sup>if we are faithless, he remains faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself.

This is another one of Paul’s poetic passages, and one that always confused me. I understood that Paul was saying that to die with Christ, that symbolic death of our old lives and rebirth to a new life in Christ symbolized in baptism, results in eternal life. But the denying of Christ leading to him denying us, yet we can be faithless to him but he will not do the same to us, now that confused me. What I found out though was that my understanding of denial and faithlessness were being blurred. I was taking them to be the same thing, and they are not. Much of this comes in the very confusion of the word “faith” itself. We tend to forget that faith in the New Testament is used to speak of both being faithful to someone, especially Christ, and as a reference to the Gospel itself, that is belief in Jesus as Lord and Savior. What Paul is saying

here in 2 Tim. is that if one denies the Gospel, that is to deny that Jesus is Lord and Savior, then Christ cannot recognize them as one of his own. To be faithless here means something totally different though. Paul says that if we are faithless, that is to doubt Christ in thought or deed, Christ will still be faithful to us. In other words friends, we're going to mess up. We are going to sin, there will be days when our actions will push others away from God, there will even be times when we doubt God. But none of these things will result in losing our salvation. Christ will remain faithful for us even when we lack the strength. What we cannot do though is deny Christ, that is to turn our backs on the Gospel and deny that Jesus is Lord.

That is also what Paul is talking about in our passage in Colossians. When Paul speaks of continuing in the faith in v. 23, he is talking about faith as the Gospel, not as being true to Christ. In other words, faith here is belief, not faithfulness. Does that mean we can act however we wish? Absolutely not! Jesus still expects us to do our best to expunge sin from our lives and to start living for him. That's the whole point of what has preceded these verses and much of what will follow. However, we do not have to fear losing our salvation. God knows your heart. If you believe, you are saved. Those who are able to deny him are those who are "alienated and hostile in mind." They are the ones who refuse to accept Jesus as their savior.

There will be days when you feel weak, and there may even be days when you're tempted to believe something contrary to what Christ has taught us. However, Christ is your strength. And not just any Christ; he is the one described here in Colossians 1. He is your creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Through Christ, God the Father brought the world into existence and defeated death itself. Christ has been exalted to the right hand of the Father, and he is the ultimate authority over all beings, whether they believe it or not.

When the world is weak, your strength lies in the one who is preeminent over the entire universe. And when we have our minds straight about who Christ is and what he has done for us, we will not be led astray by others who believe differently. However, I began this message by saying that we cannot truly divorce our thoughts from our actions. So how are they connected? In other words, what should we be doing with all this knowledge?

### *The Response of the Church*

Paul's answer to this lies in verses 24-28:

<sup>24</sup>Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, <sup>25</sup>of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup>the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. <sup>27</sup>To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. <sup>28</sup>Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup>For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Now what in the world is Paul saying here? Was the brutal torture and crucifixion of Christ somehow an incomplete payment for our sins? Are we to undergo some form of physical punishment, purgatory perhaps, to finish paying for our sins. No! That goes against everything else we know about the Gospel. But Paul's statement does align with something that we do know about how Christ works in this world, and that is that the Church is to be the hands and voice of Christ in this hurting world. We are the ones charged with the Great Commandment (Mt. 28:19-20), which Paul paraphrases here in v. 28.

When Paul says he is "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions," he is not saying that the sacrifice of Christ was insufficient; he is saying that the sufferings of Christ are not finished. We, the church, you and I in this room today, are ambassadors for Christ, and we will

suffer in some measure for our faith. When we suffer, Jesus suffers with us. He knows our pain because he both felt it himself and because he is ever-present with us.

The amazing thing is what else Paul says about Christ's afflictions, they are for the sake of the church. We prefer to think of salvation as an individual, private experience. But these verses say otherwise. Throughout Colossians 1, Paul is speaking of the corporate body. The church is not an afterthought to the peace that Christ made by his blood on the cross. "The church is more than the byproduct of reconciliation; it is the goal."<sup>4</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Reflect back on Paul's hymn that began this message. Verses 15-17 speak of Christ's person, who he is, his divine status if you will. The second half of v. 18 through v. 20 speak of his work, what he has done for us. And here, right in the middle we find the church, the point of the move from heaven to earth.<sup>5</sup> Christ did not come to save as many as possible while he walked this earth. He came to establish his church, those who would continue to be his presence until he returned. And he did not create us for ourselves. Surely our fellowship with one another is intended to give us strength and encouragement, but that is not our purpose. "The church of Jesus Christ does not exist for us. We exist for one reason: to proclaim Christ the firstborn of all creation!"<sup>6</sup> We are the keepers of the "mystery hidden for ages," that Christ is the supreme authority over all of creation, and it is through his death and resurrection that we can be reconciled to God. It is this Christ who is our strength in an ever-weakening world, and it is our job to offer this strength to that weak world. If we remember nothing else from today's sermon, let's at least remember that. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>5</sup> Witherington, 131.

<sup>6</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting of the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 260.

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