

COLOSSIANS 1: Christ Above All
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GFC – 1/14/18

Our theme for this year is Going Deeper – Going Higher. We have a vision to go deeper in worship – God’s presence – and the things of the Spirit. We also are going deeper in the word.

I’m excited that today we are beginning a new sermon series through the epistle of Colossians. The theme of this book is Christ Above All!

Have you ever wished God would speak a word that addressed the things we deal with in our culture? Well He did! The book of Colossians addresses many things we are facing today:

- Sexual immorality
- Making up your own belief system by combining ideas from different religions
- Confusion in marriage and disintegration of families

All that and more was going on in Colossae.

Let’s look at some background of this letter. Colossians 1:1-2 says:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul had been previously known as Saul – a Jewish Pharisee who persecuted the early church until he had an encounter with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. He was going there to persecute Christians – but he was blinded by a light from heaven and had an encounter with Jesus Christ that changed his life forever. He got radically saved! He became a new man! Saul became the apostle Paul. He went on to take the Gospel to the known world and write 2/3s of the New Testament.

Paul starts out Colossians with his credentials – an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. The original disciples of Christ were not the only apostles. The word apostle means “one who is sent; a messenger; an ambassador.”

Apostles are important to the life of the church. Ephesians 2:19-20 says:

You are members of God’s family. Together, we are His house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.

Ephesians 4:11-13 says:

He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Apostles are foundational to the church because they are the ones sent to start churches. They are fathers in the faith. Olen Griffing has an apostolic role here at Grace Fellowship Church. He has been my pastor for almost 40 years and he is a father in the faith.

Please understand that apostolic ministry is relational! In 1 Corinthians 9:2, Paul told the Corinthian church:

Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Apostolic authority is based on relationships. For instance, although Paul was universally respected in the Early Church as an apostle, he was not an apostle to every church. He was an apostle only to those with whom he had a relationship. Churches in other cities and regions acknowledged Paul's apostleship, but he was not their apostle.

Other believers respected Paul as minister and leader - but he only had apostolic responsibility for the churches he had helped start and those where he had relationship as mentor, teacher, and father in the faith. Paul's relationship with these churches is the reason we have the books of Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Paul wrote these letters because he was directly responsible for the spiritual well-being of these believers and because he had a unique apostolic relationship either with them or with their local leadership.

Relationships were very important to Paul. He believed in team ministry. That's why the book of Colossians starts out with Paul and Timothy. When you read the Bible you almost always read Paul AND. Paul and Timothy or Barnabas or Silas. In his letters, Paul mentions 14 fellow workers, 4 fellow prisoners, 2 fellow slaves, 2 fellow soldiers and 1 yokefellow.

This why we are so committed to team ministry at Grace Fellowship. Jesus ministered with a team. Paul ministered with a team – and so should we.

Most of Paul's letters were written to people he knew in churches he started. Not Colossians. The church in Colossae was started by a co-worker of Paul's named Epaphras, who was from Colossae. Once the Colossian church was established, the congregation received Paul as the apostle to that church based on his relationship to Epaphras.

Colossae was a city in Asia Minor – now called Turkey. Colossae was once a busy city in the Lycus River Valley. But not in Paul's day.

When the Romans took over the region they built a new road that bypassed Colossae and the city was slowly dying. Most of Paul's Letters were written to congregations in large or important cities: Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi. Colossae was a town that had seen better days. Although the place was insignificant, the letter that Paul sent there is very important.

Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. Epaphras visited Paul in prison and updated him on how well the church in Colossae was doing. He also shared the various ways this church was being tempted to turn away from Jesus by their culture. Epaphras informed Paul of the false teaching, pluralistic religion and pagan secularism which threatened the churches in the region.

There was a major problem with syncretism – which means the combination of different forms of belief or practice; the fusion of two or more different religions. In Colossae, this meant the fusion of Christianity, Jewish legalism, Greek philosophy, and Oriental mysticism.

So – they believed in Jesus but added other beliefs to Him. This had led to confusion of marriage roles, disintegration of family life, problems on the job, worldly values and declining economy. Sound familiar?

Today we have people who want to pick and choose from various belief systems to come up with their own. In our age of tolerance, the message is that “one religion is just as good as another.” Many people today try to take the best from different religions and make up their own private religion. But putting together you own homemade belief system never works. It didn't work in Colossae and it doesn't work now in America. It never works to try to add something to Jesus!

In Colossae – people added paganism to Jesus. They thought this would ward off demons and evil ancestors. But Paul wrote that we only overcome through Jesus Christ!

A popular philosophy in Colossae is known today as Gnosticism. Gnosis means “to know.” As opposed to agnostic – “don't know.” The Gnostics prided themselves on their knowledge. They claimed to have information superior to that of the apostles and tried to create the impression that a person could not be truly happy unless he had been initiated into the deepest secrets of their cult.

Some Gnostics believed that the body was inherently sinful, so they practiced asceticism, a system of self-denial or even self-torture, in an effort to attain a higher spiritual state. Others went to the opposite extreme, licentiousness - living in carnal indulgence, saying that the body didn't matter or have any effect on a person's spiritual life!

Two other errors were found in Colossae: antinomianism and legalism. Antinomianism means “against the law” and it teaches that under grace a person

does not need to practice self-control but may give full vent to his bodily appetites and passions.

Legalism is a system of ceremonial observances by which a man hoped to achieve righteousness before God. Legalism adds law to Jesus.

So basically, the false teachers at Colossae were adding to the gospel. Adding to Jesus. Saying that Jesus was not enough. There was more you needed to know or do in order to be saved. And guess what? The errors which existed in Colossae are still with us today. That's why we study this ancient letter to an ancient people.

The human condition has not really changed. We are still facing the same issues the Colossians faced. Gnosticism has reappeared in Christian Science, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unity, Scientology and other systems.

Antinomianism is characteristic of all who say that because we are under grace, we can live as we please. Legalism is seen in people who think they can earn God's favor by their own works.

In Colossians, the Apostle Paul masterfully counteracts all these errors by showing the glory of the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ; by showing that Christ is the Lord of creation and the head of the church.

The theme of Colossians is Christ Above All. In this letter, Paul shows how Christ is supreme and all sufficient. He is not just part of a philosophy or religion – He is Lord of all. He is above:

Philosophy – Tradition - Worldliness - Legalism

Mysticism – Asceticism - Selfishness

Past – Present - Future

Christ is above ALL!

Paul wrote this letter to encourage the Colossians to overcome the culture and stay strong in Christ because He was enough! And this teaching will encourage us to overcome our culture and stay strong in Christ because He is still enough!

Paul is encouraging us to stick with Jesus plus nothing! Paul begins that encouragement with an amazing prayer. This is a prayer we should all pray for ourselves!

3 We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, 4 since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints;

I want you to notice who Paul is thanking: God.

He was not thanking the Colossians for their faith or love.

He knew the source was Christ who is above all – including ourselves.

When we really understand who Christ is and what He's done for us – there is no place for arrogance in the Christian life. When we boast – we boast in Him!

Also, notice he heard of their faith in Jesus and their love for the saints. Those two things go hand in hand. I know it's popular for people to say today, "I love Jesus but I hate the church." But that's really impossible. 1 John 4:20-21 says:

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Don't say you love God but hate His family.
Don't say you love the Head of the church, but not the church.
If you truly love God, you will love His family!

So, Paul says we have faith and love:

5 because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth; 7 as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, 8 who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.

We can only have faith and love when our hope is in heaven. That's not just talking about when we die. Hope is not an eternal reward for faith and love. Paul is saying that hope is the source of faith and love!

So, where is your hope? On earth or in heaven?
In yourself or other people or in the Lord God Almighty!
How do you know? By whether or not you have faith in God and love for others.
If you lose those it is because of misplaced hope.
You are hoping in something other than Christ, who is above all!

Verse 6 says that wherever the truth of the gospel goes – it bears fruit. It works in every place and every culture. It brings hope to hopeless people. Faith to faithless people. Salvation to lost people. Deliverance to captive people. The gospel of the kingdom works wherever it goes! And when you receive it – the gospel will bear fruit in you!

9 For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;

The Gnostics thought they had deeper knowledge than the Christians. Remember – the Greek word for knowledge is "gnosis."

But the word Paul used here is “epignosis” which means full and perfect knowledge. And that full knowledge only comes from God and His Word.

Knowledge answers the question: “What?” It is about information.

Wisdom answers the question: “How?” It shows how to implement and put knowledge into practice.

Understanding answers the question: “Why?” This word literally means “to put it all together.” It reveals the motivation and ways of God.

When you know the “why” behind the “what” you are motivated to obey!
That’s why Paul goes on to say:

10 that you may have a walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; 11 strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy;

What we know and believe determines how we walk – how we live. Believing comes before behaving! Knowing God’s will and doing God’s will are both things we can’t do in our own strength. That’s why we need to be strengthened with God’s glorious power! Philippians 2:12-13 says:

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to do according to His good purpose.

He doesn’t say, “Work for your salvation.” He says, “Work out your salvation.” You can’t work something out in your life until God works it in.

True change is from the inside out.

We can only know God’s will through His Word.

And we can only do God’s will through the power of His Spirit.

12 giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. 13 He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, 14 in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Notice that these things are past tense. We are qualified! We are delivered! Because of that – in the present we have redemption and forgiveness.

Trying to qualify yourself to be saved is impossible! It’s like me trying to qualify to run a marathon in the Olympics. You must go through qualifying races to get there and no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t do it!

And we cannot qualify ourselves for salvation. We can’t run fast enough! Fortunately – Jesus has already run the race for us! He took our sins – He died our death – He rose from the dead and ascended on high! And He qualified us to be partakers of salvation!

He delivered us from the kingdom of darkness!
 He brought us into the kingdom of light!
 He redeemed us and forgave our sins!

The word used in Colossians for “deliver” literally means to rescue and transfer. It’s a military term that describes what happened when one empire won a victory over another. They would take the population of the defeated country and transfer every man, woman and child to the conqueror’s land.

Or think back to when God delivered the Children of Israel from Egypt. Not only did He set them free – He also transferred them to the Promised Land!
 That is the word Paul uses here - God has rescued us and transferred us.

He rescued us from darkness and transferred us to light!
 He rescued us from hopelessness and transferred us to hope!
 He rescued us from slavery and transferred us to freedom!
 He rescued us from condemnation and transferred us to forgiveness!
 He rescued us from the kingdom of Satan and transferred us to the kingdom of God!

And it works well to read this Colossians passage backwards:
 Because we are redeemed and forgiven by the blood of Jesus –
 We have been delivered from Satan and brought into God’s kingdom –
 We have been qualified to be a partaker of the inheritance of the saints –

We have patience, longsuffering and joy because we have been strengthened by the power of God.
 Now we can be fruitful and increasing in the knowledge of God!
 Now we can walk worthy of the Lord and fully please Him.

Not because of our works – but because of Christ’s work on the cross.
 Not because of our power – but because of the resurrection power of Christ.
 Not because we qualified ourselves – but we are qualified by Christ – saved by Christ – forgiven by Christ – redeemed by Christ.

When you boil it all down - it’s not about us at all!

It’s about Jesus Christ who is above all!