

Colossians: Christ and the Church Part 3
Colossians 1:15-20
Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on April 30, 2023

Jesus Christ is not valued at all until He is valued above all. - Augustine

The Chicago Campaign

In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition was held in Chicago. It brought an estimated twenty million people. That was an astronomical amount, especially considering this was in pre-automobile days. Twenty years after Mrs. O'Leary's cow¹ started the great fire, the Windy City was now showing its rebuilt splendor to the rest of the world. And the show itself was massive and impressive.

Among the features of the Exposition was the World Parliament of Religions. During this meeting, representatives of the world's religions met to share their best points and to produce a new world religion perhaps even by blending the best points together. Religious leaders across America made their way to America's Second City to protest the Parliament of World Religions. However, Chicago's own legendary theologian and pastor Dwight L. Moody had a different perspective. Rather than attack the Parliament like his colleagues, Moody instead commissioned hundreds of evangelists and assigned them to "preaching posts" throughout the city. He used churches and rented theaters. He even rented a circus tent from which he would preach.

Moody wrote, "I am going to make Jesus Christ so attractive that men will turn to him."² Moody knew that preaching that Christ was preeminent – the peerless, supreme, all-sufficient Christ, clearly presented – was most important. And those sermons made an impact. The Chicago Campaign was Moody's greatest evangelistic work of his life as thousands came to faith in Christ. Moody's approach – presenting Christ as first place in creation and in the Church – was an approach that stretched all the way back to the first century and Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. Paul also wrote about the preeminence of Christ, and I invite you to turn with me to Colossians 1:15-18. (read text)

¹ Allegedly.

² Warren Wiersbe, *Be Complete* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1981) 52-53.

Preeminent or Prominent?

Paul had heard reports that false teachers had promoted a distortion about the person of Christ. Christ was just the first rung on the ladder of spirituality. Christ was prominent in that heresy called Gnosticism. Prominent but not preeminent. Jesus was prominent as one of many angelic forms of god. In claiming that Jesus was a spirit creature, they denied both the divinity and the humanity of Christ. This was a heresy about the person of Christ that opened the door to confusion about the gospel, the church and even the Christian life.

It is not surprising to see various “isms” invade the church and be taught alongside Christ, as if Jesus were not enough on his own. That still happens today. And it happened in the first century and Paul sets out to correct it by exalting the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus. In verse 15, Paul begins the main body of the letter with a declaration of truth. He does not begin by refuting the error. He chooses to do what Moody did. Promote what is true and emphasize the preeminence of Christ.

New Testament scholars believe that verse 15 may very well have been a hymn that was sung in the first century church. And even if it was not a hymn and the words did not come from worship, upon reading them, the believer should be compelled to worship. And the worship of Christ should always flow into and impact our witness for Christ.

Here in Colossians 1, Paul presents the most critical and necessary truth of Christianity. *Christianity is Christ and Christ is God*. In these verses Paul gives us two reasons why a person can live the Christian life with total confidence in the supremacy of Christ. We will focus on the first of those two reasons in the first half of Colossians 1:15.

Reason #1: Christ is Supreme in Eternity and Over Creation

Paul begins by explaining how Christ is supreme in eternity by stating two facts. First of all, God is invisible. This truth is consistently taught throughout Scripture:

- *John 4:24 “God is spirit...”*
- *1 Tim 1:17 “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God...”*
- *1 John 4:12 “No one has ever seen God...”*
- *1 Tim 6:15-17 “King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see”*

- *Ex 33:20* “You cannot see my face, for humans cannot see me and live.”

- *Deut 4:12* “...you didn’t see a form, there was only a voice.”

God is invisible. No one has ever seen God. God appeared in theophanies but his essence, his essential nature has never been seen. God is invisible. Any person who claims to have seen the person of God is a lying liar who tells lies.³

God is invisible. You and I can’t see God with physical eyes because He is spirit. We cannot see God physically. And without a mediator, we cannot see God spiritually.

Our creaturely wickedness means that we cannot spiritually see God directly without mediation. Without Jesus as our go-between, we cannot see God because God is too bright, too glorious, too great, too holy. John 6 tells us that only Jesus the Son can see the God the Father with unmediated directness.

A Slight Digression...

I know what some of you are thinking. You are thinking, “But the Bible does talk about seeing God. What about?”

- *Matt 5:8* “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will **see God.**”

- *Genesis 32:30* Jacob named the place Peniel, “For I have seen God face to face...”

- *Job 19:26-27* “Even after my skin has been destroyed, yet I will see God in my flesh. I will see him myself; my eyes will look at him and not as a stranger.”

In the Old Testament, the term to see was sometimes used symbolically to mean finally understanding something or finally being able to discern the beauty. It is what we mean when we sing, “Was blind but now I see.”⁴ In this way, “seeing God” means finally understanding and discerning the beauty and glory of God after being unable to before. Jesus has made a spiritual understanding possible through faith.

And one day we will see the glory of God when we finally see the IMAGE of the invisible God for ourselves when we see Jesus face to face.

³ Sorry Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, who claimed to see both God and Jesus as men as a child. That simply is not true. The Bible tells me so.

⁴ *Amazing Grace* by John Newton.

Back on Track: Christ is Supreme in Eternity Continued

God is invisible. However, Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created...The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed His glory, the glory of the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... - John 1:1-3, 14.*

Paul uses the Greek word *eikon*, from which we get our “icon.” An icon is a physical representation or physical manifestation of something. And while we masterfully craft beautiful spiritual iconography to adorn homes and churches, we do NOT have the capacity to create something that can fully or faithfully represent God (Exodus 20:4). And yet, Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created MANKIND in the image of God. In other words, we are made with personhood. We have a mind, a will, and emotions but humanity does not fully perfectly represent the image of God.

Our sinfulness means we cannot represent the image of God essentially – in the essence or nature of God. We do not share in the essential attributes such as God’s eternality, immutability, omnipotence, omniscience, or His omnipresence. And we cannot share God’s image morally because all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23). But there is One who is able to share God’s image physically, to manifest the glory of God and the essence and nature of God physically.

Jesus Christ truly, perfectly, represents God essentially and morally. That is the second fact Paul states in support of the supremacy of Christ in eternity. God is invisible. And Christ is the image of the invisible God.

Jesus represents or manifests God. *“No one has ever seen God. The one and only Son, who is himself God and is at the Father’s side – he has revealed him.” (John 1:18)* John wrote that Jesus has made God known to us. And John used the word *exegesis*. He wrote that Jesus was the *exegesis* of God. *Exegesis* is a term used to mean “to bring out of” and is used to describe faithful preaching that exposes God’s intended meaning in a text rather than a preacher imposing his own meaning⁵.

⁵ Reading one’s own thoughts or ideas *into* a text is called *eisegesis*. For example, were I to preach that Hagar’s name meant “Runaway” (which it doesn’t) and that she was “an invisible runaway, alone, victimized until God saw her,” I would be reading my own ideas and trying to make them fit into Genesis 16.

Jesus is literally the exegesis of God. Do you want to know what the invisible God looks like? Look at Jesus. He is visible image of the invisible God and only Jesus makes it possible for us to spiritually see God.

Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact *imprint* of His nature. The Greek word translated "exact imprint" meant the impress left by a die on a coin or a seal on wax. Jesus is the exact impress of the essence of God. Paul tells us that Jesus wasn't just a look-alike or a plaster representation of God. He was the revelation of what God is really like.

Christ's supremacy is boldly proclaimed as Paul says he is the *eikon* of the invisible God. He is supreme! He isn't some second-rate emanation from the true God, a Gnostic step in the ladder to understanding the true God. He IS God. It reveals truth about both God and us. As Jesus is the image of God, He is what YOU AND I were meant to be in terms of character: we were created in HIS image. Jesus is supreme in eternity and must give Him first place in our lives.

What Do You See?

When you would visit the Smith household on Indian Drive in Enid, OK, in the family room there were three photo albums on the coffee table. A thin blue one. A thin yellow one. And a large green one. The green one contained photos from two family vacations: Disney World in 1979 and the Minnehaha Falls in 1977. The blue one was for my oldest brother's childhood. The yellow one contained pictures of both my older brothers. There was no other photo album for the youngest Smith boy.

All that now exists to document the proof of my childhood is a small, red photo album down in our basement. There, in those pages, a lot is revealed. For instance, I realized how much more invested my parents were in my older brother's lives as they both had two photo albums. My album didn't even exist until I put it together myself when I was in college. However, you look through those old pictures of me as a kid, and there is no denying who my son's father is. Especially when my son was four, five, six years old. He was the spitting image. He looked so similar to how I looked at that age.

But he was and is not me. When you look at him, you are not looking at me. Jesus was the image of the invisible God, the exact imprint of God's essence, the exegesis of God. When you see Jesus, you are seeing the shared essence and nature of the Father.

That means that Jesus is preeminent, he surpasses everything, because He is the image of the invisible God. He is the physical representation of the nature of God. Jesus is the physical manifestation of the holiness of God. Because of this supremacy in eternity, he is not merely to be prominent in our lives. He is to be preeminent, surpassing and beyond anything else.

When you look at your life, is Jesus prominent or is He preeminent? Is Jesus King of kings and Lord of lords in your life? Or is he prominent among a few other gods in there?

We could spend a lot of time preaching against the Parliament of False Idols that make up our lives. But today, let's instead focus on shifting Christ from a place of shared prominence to His deserved preeminence.

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. When you have seen Him, you've seen the Father.

FURTHER THOUGHTS

Who in your family do you look like? Who in your family does your personality most closely resemble? When you look at yourself, what aspects or qualities of your parents do you see?

Read John 1:1-18. How does that text help us better understand Colossians 1:15-20?

Read Philippians 2:5-11. How does that text help us better understand Colossians 1:15-20?

Read Hebrews 1:1-4. How does that text help us better understand Colossians 1:15-20?

What is the difference between Christ being prominent in your life and Christ being preeminent in your life?

What steps might someone need to take to change from prominence to preeminence?

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Wednesday Bible Study: 10:30AM – The Book of Mark. All are welcome.

Silver Wings Trip: Silver Wings Ministry is going to see *Hello Dolly* on Friday, July 21st at 2:30PM. The cost is \$38 per ticket, and this needs to be paid to the church office by Wednesday May 31st. They will carpool and leave the church parking lot at 11:30AM and enjoy lunch together before the show begins.

At the quarterly business meeting on Monday April 24: The church voted to adopt the proposed Constitution and Bylaws, effectively replacing the previous version. Thank you to the Constitution and Bylaws Committee for their hard work. The church also voted to hire Richard Marsh as the Financial Administrator.

VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL: JUNE 19-23 – 6-8:30PM This is for all children Pre-K through completed 5th Grade. We still need volunteers, and we will also need donations for snacks, volunteer suppers, crafts, and decorations. Donation boards are out now. If you have questions, ask Pastor Craig for more info.

Colossians Scripture Journals are available for \$7. It is the CSB version and will allow notes to be taken while looking at Scripture. Check with Pastor Craig about getting yours today!