

We are continuing in this letter to the first century church in Colossae. Much like a Sunday service, we move from the Introduction and prayer into a hymn. The verses that we are looking at today, with their order and structure, can best be described as a poem or a hymn. So let's dive into this song of praise to god from the pen of Paul. **Colossians 1.15-20:**

*He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.*

*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.*

*And he is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
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.*

*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
making peace by the blood of his cross.*

In the last few weeks we have looked at the major overarching influences on this church, and how we are in a very similar place. We looked at the redemptive promises of the Roman Empire, the great power that ruled the world at this time,

and we saw how it mirrored, in many ways, the American ideology that we live in. We looked at the false gods offered, the many hopes that the world gives us to put our faith in. Last week, we looked at knowledge, the difference between the Spiritual Wisdom that comes from God and the wisdom of this world. In all of these things we can see how this material world, and our limited scope within it, can lead us to honor the creation before the creator. How it can lead us to trust in our desires over His Will. How we view the world through the realm of the temporary rather than on the God of eternity.

In all of these false gods, false promises, and false hopes, we can see how easy it is to buy into them. How real and true they can seem when we trust our own instincts. How Satan baits us, not by offering us hard drugs and selling us prostitutes, but by convincing us to trust in ourselves. God's power can not be diminished, but we can minimize that power in our own life when we decide that we know better.

It's this trust in our cleverness that Paul goes after today. As we have seen the last few weeks, his letter to the Colossians is a guided missile that hits right at the heart of their (and our) idolatry. Paul is not dancing around the major issues...instead he jumps right into the center of the major debates, armed with the power of the Gospel and aims to destroy anything and everything that is taking away from the glory that belongs to God.

And today we get to that which, at least in my own life, is the greatest threat to God's glory...CYNICISM. See, we here in the NW part of the US relish in the fact that we are not fooled by anything. That we don't buy what you are selling. Sure, we'll try, experience, embrace, and even believe, but the chance of us being identified with anything apart from ourselves is unlikely. In our attempt to not sell out to anything, we have sold out to an ideology...that ideology is: the highest form of intellect is doubt.

It used to be that to believe in something, to actually know that which you trusted in and give in to it fully, was what constituted strength and wisdom. Now, we are told, that intelligence is to question everything and believe in nothing. It is carried along by John Stewart and Stephen Colbert, geniuses, in the fact that they can craft a message, simply by making fun of everything and everyone.

The message that they are sending is not that he is right and she is wrong...but that everything is wrong. Trust nothing. Hold your beliefs, but don't hold them too close, so that you don't ever have to be wrong. Never have to put your foot in your mouth.

And so, our culture has adopted a theology of cynicism. And in this culture, you are labeled a wing-nut, or a fanatic, or an extremist if you actually believe in something. The greatest crime in our world today is not to believe in some crazy, whacked out thing, but to believe in something so strongly that you are willing to say that something else is wrong (Nobody had a problem with Tom Cruise and his Scientology until he started going around jumping on couches). No one wants to be around a person who actually stand their with both feet firmly planted on the ground and declare that something is right and true, and/or that something else is wrong and false.

And this has seeped into our churches and polluted the word of God. We now have a whole culture of churches that want to sit and deconstruct the Scripture, rather than allowing it to instruct their lives. They want to have numerous conversations about Jesus, without ever coming to any defining truth of who He is. They want to question and discard every level of church tradition without replacing them with equally valid forms of liturgy. It has, in many ways, divorced the reality of God from daily life.

Why? Because a god who is there to be questioned, deconstructed and then put back together is no god at all. In order for God to God at all, He must be

beyond our ability to change Him. He must be absolute. And an absolute God is no less God when we are at work, or hanging out with our friends, or eating or drinking or anything we do. He is still fully God.

That is the God that Paul describes to the Colossians. Because the first century had cynics too. One of these groups was known as the Gnostics. The Gnostics have gotten a little extra press in the last few years because of The DaVinci Code, but in reality they were just a group of first century heretics who sought to limit the power of God by limiting His scope. What they did was separate the world into two distinct realities: the material world and the Spiritual world, which was really quite brilliant. Because by doing this they could give God control over the spiritual aspects of their lives, while retaining the power over their everyday lives. So they got to do whatever they wanted, and then gave that which existed in the invisible world to their god. This was the heresy that was creeping into the Colossian church. People were trying to divide the Spiritual life and the Physical life. In this, they were trying to steal away a portion of Jesus' reign. They were redefining the impact of the life of Jesus. So what is this poem that Paul gives in response?

This poem gives a very clear picture of who Jesus is. It is divided into 5 parts, each of which describes an aspect of His character and power.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Paul begins by declaring Jesus the complete manifestation of God. He says:

*He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.*

As the image of the invisible God, Jesus makes understandable to us the complex nature of God. It is not that He is a picture of God, like something distinct and separate from God that simply represents Him. Instead, when Jesus

is referred to as the image of the invisible God, it means that Jesus embodies everything that it is to be God. When we look at Jesus, we not only see what God is like...we see God. Jesus is God incarnate, which means in the flesh. In Jesus, we are given the invisible made visible.

He is *the firstborn of all creation*. The concept of firstborn here is somewhat lost on us, as we don't give any special honor to the oldest in the family. As a matter of fact, in most of our families, the oldest is simply the one who has to suffer through the parents trying to do a perfect job, and they have to suffer through having more rules, restrictions, and expectations than the preceding children. Sorry oldest kids, but as a middle child I appreciate your sacrifice. In the Bible, the firstborn was the heir to the inheritance. The oldest was the most complete offspring of the fathers. It was in the firstborn that the father's legacy would be carried on. So to refer to Jesus as the firstborn of Creation is interesting, because it refers to both His place as existing before, but also existing above creation. Jesus, it says, is both the Son of Man and the Son of God. He is the greatest man who ever lived and He is also the Son of God. He is fully man and fully God. Paul's poem now moves on from the nature of Jesus, to what He has done.

*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.*

Firstborn of creation does not mean that God created Jesus first before He created other things. Instead, it is through Jesus that everything came to be. This section is really an echo of John 1, another poetic description of Jesus that says:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In both of these descriptions we see God the Father and Son together in relationship, sharing in the act of creation. One of the Gnostic teachings was that Jesus was a created being meant to represent or image God, but not actually be God. A later version of this heresy, called Modalism, taught that Jesus was a 'mode' of God, just the way that God chose to show Himself. So instead of the three separate persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that we see in the Trinity, Jesus is reduced down to a version of God...just a piece of His glory. This belief would teach that the mode of God that we see in Creation is one mode, the God that we see in Jesus is another mode, and the work that we see in the Spirit is mode three. So the three persons have not been existing together since the beginning, coexisting in Divine relationship, and working together to accomplish the work of God, they are just different masks that God puts on. Paul (and John) hit this nail on the head. They show both that the Father, Son, and Spirit existed together since the beginning, but also that they work in union to accomplish the work of God.

We begin with creation. The world was not created apart from Jesus, like God setting the stage for the work of the Son. The Son was actively involved in every aspect of creation. As a matter of fact, it was created THROUGH HIM. This idea of cooperation is summed up beautifully by the second century theologian Irenaeus who referred to the Son and Spirit as the hands by which God the Father did the work of creating.

And it was not just the spiritual world that He created. Remember we said that the Gnostics wanted to separate the spiritual and the physical world. Paul makes it clear it was ALL THINGS. In heaven and on earth. Visible and invisible.

As a slight nod to the empire, thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities. It's all His. All things were created by Him and through Him.

But also for Him. The world exists and comes to its fullest in the gospel...in Jesus Christ. The whole world, its creation and existence exist for His glory. This is a difficult statement for us, because this means that we are created specifically to glorify Jesus. We exist for no higher purpose than to worship Jesus. So contrary to what movies, or Oprah, or even a good number of well intentioned preachers, your life has nothing to do with finding out what your purpose is. You have no responsibility to create meaning. You were already created with a meaning and purpose. You were created FOR HIM. Paul goes on:

*And he is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
And he is the head of the body, the church.*

So Jesus was not just there at the beginning; He is still here. He was the origin of all things, and now we see that in him all things hold together. He will not leave us or forsake us. He is with us always, even to the end of the age. Jesus continues to keep the world in balance. We see that He is present and working. Specifically, He continues as head of the church. His promises to the church are great: *all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*. So Jesus is not just here, and not just working, but bringing about the completion of the plan that He began at creation, and fulfilled at the cross. It is one thing to say that Jesus is here, but another to be confident that He is in control of all things and working through His church toward a specific end. He gives us purpose, and now we see He carries us along in that purpose.

Here is where we see the shift in Paul's poem. He has been setting the table for these last few verses. He has established that Jesus is DIVINE, CREATOR, SUSTAINER, and AUTHORITY. He has fully rooted us in the fact that Jesus is

SUPREME. He is the sovereign God. Now, Paul moves on to Jesus the RECONCILER. He shows how Jesus is not only all powerful, but is also SUFFICIENT. He truly is ALL we need.

*He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
that in everything he might be preeminent.
For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
making peace by the blood of his cross.*

Using the same word firstborn, we now see that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. He is not only the firstborn of creation, the one from whom all came to be, but He is also the firstborn from the dead, the one from whom all can be given new birth. To be the firstborn of the dead means that Jesus is the pathway by which people can pass from death to life. He is, in His own words: *The way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but through Him.*

And how is it that we can do this? How can we move from a life in which we are dead in our relationship to God, and dead to sin, into a life in which are reconciled to God in relationship and are renewed in our relationship to His creation? We are given life, by His death. We are able to be at peace, because He was willing to face the conflict. We are reconciled to God, because He allowed Himself to be forsaken. We need to be careful that we don't hold one aspect of Jesus while forgetting the other. It is easy to believe in Jesus, it is very difficult to believe in ALL of Jesus.

So Paul juxtaposes these two great and somewhat paradoxical aspects of Jesus: His power and His humility. Fully God and fully man. He died and he is preeminent. Creator and Redeemer.

This is the beauty of our God. He humbled Himself so that we would not receive what we deserve. He died so that we would not have to suffer the death that we owe. He bled on the cross so that we could be washed clean. And none of this took away from His power. As a matter of fact, this act of absolute submission is how he has revealed to us the nature of His power. He is powerful in the fact that He does not have to hold on to or protect His power. He did not come to us in the form that we expected. He did not come to meet our expectations. He came to change them. Jesus is very different than our idea of SUPREME AND SUFFICIENT.

Which brings me back to cynicism. Our clever denial of everything allows us to keep things away from ourselves. It insulates us from the force of the poem that we just read. If truth is simply something to be held in the mind, then we can agree with everything in these verses and then file that away in the intellect file, without it ever actually impacting how we live. Cynicism allows us to 'believe' things without actually believing them. But think for a second on how Jesus Christ, as He is described here, should ravage our lives and change us drastically.

If He is really the Supreme Creator, sustaining all things by His hand, then He is more real than anything we see. If He is in dominion over ALL things, visible and invisible, than He is in control of even the things we can't see and understand. He is more real than your emotions, your intellect and your worry. If He is really in control of all things and working all together for His good, than we have no reason to be overcome by the things that cause us such concern. We can live boldly, free from the fear that holds us back from doing the work of Jesus Christ. Our God is fully in control of this realm, we must be a people who live in the peace that this brings as we keep our eyes focused on the HOPE THAT IS LAID UP FOR US IN HEAVEN.

If Jesus is really the Sufficient Savior, the humble servant who reconciled ALL THINGS by His work on the cross, than we need not worry about what we are doing to help make ourselves savable. He has done the work. We broke the relationship between ourselves and God. There is nothing you can do to work your way back. The truth is the more you try...the more you work, the further you will get from Him. The only way to relationship with God is to come back to the firstborn of the dead. Put away your cynical attitude: that doesn't really seem like it will work, it seems like I need to do something else, something more, and humbly approach Jesus to confess that you are a totally helpless. That you have been trying to do this without Him for a long time, and that it has not been going well. If you have not before, I pray that you come to Jesus today.

For the majority of you, you have heard these things before, and yet, if you are honest, you know that you do not feel peace most of the time. You know the facts of Jesus, but you have not actually allowed this truth to set in deep and permeate. You feel oppressed and controlled by the things of this world (*whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities*) and you feel like you need something else. The truth is, Jesus is sufficient and any and every situation, we just need to let Him in rather than trying to understand HOW HE WORKS.

I am going to close with one of my favorite sections of Scripture, from **Phillipians 2**, which shows us a Jesus who is both SUPREME and SUFFICIENT. My prayer this week is that you allow Jesus to become real. Really CREATOR, SUSTAINER, AUTHORITY, and the one who RECONCILES you back to Himself so that you can be a friend of God.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God

has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.