

## “The Incomparable Christ”

*Colossians 1:15-20*

### Introduction

Good morning. Today we start a four week series entitled, Passionately Following Jesus. Those three words are the simplest way for us to communicate what we believe is the vision of OBC. We want each and every person and this body to be passionately following Jesus.

When you think of the word passion... I think of some of those contestants at the Wheels and Squeals cook-off and their passion for BBQ. I think of Brownlee's and the Biery's and their radical commitment to the Kansas State Wildcats. The word “passionately” is a word that means your commitment goes beyond just an intellectual agreement. It means that you are captivated, that you are engaging your emotions and desires as well as your will. To be passionate is to have intense desires or strong aspirations or fierce commitment to something. And that is how we are called to follow Jesus. We want to follow Jesus with all that we are and all that we have. Imagine how we might write that phrase if we weren't passionate... how about these vision statements...

*Nonchalantly following Jesus...*

*Casually following Jesus...*

*Lethargically following Jesus...*

*Leisurely following Jesus...*

How do those look to you? Those just don't seem right, do they? There is just something about what we know of Jesus that just doesn't allow for that kind of commitment does it? When Jesus engaged people about his role in their lives, he was pretty strong. He didn't allow for any rivals or competitors.

Look with me at Matthew 10:37-39. READ. Those are strong words. Jesus is demanding to be front and center in your life. He is asking to be unrivaled. He expects your passionate commitment. Jesus isn't satisfied with playing second fiddle or having second place or getting 1<sup>st</sup> runner up in your life.

So passionately is an important word. But it isn't the most important word in our vision statement. Passion is important, because it is supposed to describe the outworking of our faith. But not everything hinges on our passion. Everything hinges on the object of one's passion. I hear people all the time tell me, “Mike, it doesn't matter what you put your faith in. What matters is that you have a passionate faith. Your faith can be anything. It isn't the object that matters, it is the faith.”

Friends, I totally disagree with that. I think what we put our faith in is more important than our faith. Because the object of our faith determines everything. Let me give you my favorite illustration for this. Let's say that you are about to board an airplane. The plane looks great. As you get on the plane you have all the faith in the world that the airplane can fly to your destination. You are even confident that it is going to be on time. But what you don't know is that the maintenance and inspections haven't been done on the aircraft for two years... and this will be its final journey because it is going to fall apart in the air. When that plane's engine breaks

apart... does it matter how much faith you have in the plane? No. Does it matter how passionate your faith is? No. You see, if your faith is in the wrong object, it doesn't matter how much of it you have. The strength of your faith is relative to the object of your faith. Without a worthy object, all the faith in the world is misplaced.

So over the next weeks we want to talk about what it will look like to passionately follow Jesus. But before we talk about how we passionately follow Jesus, we need to just take a few moments and focus on the object of our faith - Jesus. If Jesus demands to be front and center in our lives, to be unrivaled in our love, then we have to determine if He is the worthy object for us to place our faith in. We have to decide, "Should Christ be the single most important passion in my life?"

So if you would, please turn with me to Colossians 1. This morning I want to take a look at vs. 15-20. In the book of Colossians, Paul is writing to a church that was probably started by one of Paul's converts in Ephesus, a man named Epaphras. It appears that people in the church a shaman-like figure who had attracted a following and was presenting himself as a spiritual guide who claimed superior insight into the spiritual realm that what Paul taught and presented in the gospel of Jesus Christ. So people were mixing together pagan practices with their Christian understanding. They were praying to angels instead of God and were engaging in unusual body rituals. It would be like today if someone was to take a little of New Age thinking, a little Eastern Mysticism, a little Angelology, and a little Christianity and mix it together. Jesus was just one among many options.

Paul realizes that they have lost sight of the focus of their faith - Jesus Christ. They have focused too much on their faith in whatever and not enough on the object of their faith. So in one of the most Christ-centered teachings in the NT, Paul takes them back to a focus on Jesus and puts Jesus at the center of everything. Paul presents Jesus as preeminent. Yes, that is a big word. Preeminent means to stand out among others as superior. It means to be the most excellent, to tower above, to excel all. Jesus is not one spiritual option among many others. Christ is preeminent.

Look at these verses with me. I want to hone in on vs. 15-20 this morning. READ vs. 15-20.

These verses are written in a prose and most scholars believe that they are not just majestic words about Christ, but were written to be sung and remembered and were an early hymn in the church. So let's look at these verses together. This morning we see the preeminence or superiority of Christ in two ways. First, we see that **Christ is Preeminent - and we see it in His role in Creation.** Look again at verse 15.

<sup>15</sup> **And He is the image of the invisible God,** Jesus is called the image of God. The word used here is *eikwn* from which we get our English word 'icon', which refers to a statue or likeness of something. In Matthew, the word is used to describe the image or likeness of Caesar that was stamped on a coin (Mt. 22:20). In Christ we have a perfect and present image of God - Christ is the visible presentation of the invisible God. Jesus is the perfect and glorious and unique revelation of God. In Christ, God is clearly and fully declared. God, who can't be seen, is perfectly represented and manifested in Jesus Christ. God may not be accessible to human eyes, but in Christ we have beheld the glory of the Father; the full, final and complete revelation of God.

He is the image of the invisible God... and then it says He is **the firstborn of all creation**. The word 'firstborn' has been misunderstood often. This verse is the one that the Jehovah Witnesses use to try to persuade you that Jesus is not God, but the first creation of God.

Although the word used here, *prwtotokos*, can mean firstborn chronologically, it is used throughout scripture to talk about being superior in position or rank. Jesus is not the first of all things created. Rather, Jesus is the one by whom the whole creation came to exist! In scripture when God is redeeming Israel from Egypt, he tells Moses to tell Pharaoh that "Israel is my firstborn son." The idea was not that Israel was born first, but that Israel had the highest place in God's sight among the nations. So firstborn underlines the primacy of someone. Jesus is not the first one born in creation, He is the one over creation. Jesus is not a created being, but the being who creates.

This idea of Jesus as the one of highest rank over creation is clearly seen in how Paul continues. But now Paul expands this. <sup>16</sup> **For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—** these are strong words declaring Jesus not as the one over creation, but the as the one agent of creation. Jesus was not just one of many involved in some part of creation, He is the one who created both the material world and the immaterial world. He created both the things of the visible earth and the immaterial agents of the invisible world of heavenly beings. Paul is declaring that there is nothing greater than Jesus. Even all the heavenly forces, whether in rebellion to Christ or not, they were all created by Him and therefore are subject to Him and His control.

And then Paul makes a crowning statement. He says, that not only is Christ the one over creation and the agent of their creation, but that Christ is the ultimate goal of creation. He says that **all things have been created through Him and for Him**. All of what has been created has not only been created BY Christ and THROUGH Christ, it has been created FOR Christ. He is not only the creator of the universe, He is the Lord of history and the ultimate goal of their very creation. Everything that exists, exists with a view to His glory. Everything that exists, exists subservient to His eternal purposes. Everything that exists, exists For Him!

And if it isn't enough that Jesus is the supreme one over creation, the one agent of creation, and the one ultimate goal of creation, He existed before creation and holds all of creation together. Look at vs. 17. <sup>17</sup> **He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together**. Jesus is not a part of creation. As the eternal son of God, He is outside of the time and space of creation. Jesus existed with God the Father and the Holy Spirit prior to creation. But then Paul says that in Christ all things hold together. Jesus is not just the creator of the universe, but the sustainer of the universe. It is by His power alone that the world holds together.

Have you ever wondered what holds the universe together? Why don't the atoms explode? Why doesn't the moon crash into the earth? Why does the earth stay in its orbit? Why doesn't a cosmic black hole suck us all in? The British Scientist Stephen Hawking says, "The eventual goal of Science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe." Yet with every step of exploration comes the need for further exploration and explanation. Why do objects fall? Because of gravity. Oh, how does gravity work? Oh, why does gravity work? You see, we already have the single theory that describes why all of creation works the way that it does and holds together. And His name is Jesus. Hebrews 1 says that he hold all things together by the Word of His power. The

Sun shines because Jesus tells it to. The earth orbits the Sun because Jesus commands it. Gravity continues because Jesus tells it to. Our lungs can absorb oxygen because Jesus says it should be so. The unity that holds together the vast diversity of all of this world is Jesus Christ and His power alone. There are no natural laws. There are only laws Christ has created and put into place and that He continues to sustain.

The most beautiful part of this is not that Jesus is some distant unengaged deity, but that He is your wonderful and loving creator. He not only wants the credit and His rightful place as your creator, He wants the credit and His rightful place as your redeemer. This is the second emphasis that Paul makes about Jesus. Not only is He preeminent in Creation, He is also equally preeminent in the work of reconciliation. **2. Christ is Preeminent - We see it in His role in Redemption.**

Look with me at vs. 18. <sup>18</sup> **He is also head of the body, the church;** The one who is Lord of the Universe and Lord over Creation is also the one who is Lord of the Church. Christ and his people are viewed here as a living body. Christ is the head, giving the body its very life and controlling its direction. The people are His body, the members carrying out His direction and doing His work. Christ is not a part of the church, but the head over the church.

**and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,** The word beginning emphasizes that Jesus is the source or the beginning of life. He was the firstborn from the dead. Again, firstborn here does not mean that he was the very first to come back from the dead, because we know Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. But as the firstborn from the dead, we know that Jesus is eternally supreme over the new creation. Christ is preeminent over death and His resurrection marked the greatest triumph in all of history. His resurrection on that first Easter morning was the declaration of a new hope and the proof that new life in Christ was possible.

The triumph of Christ in the resurrection leads Paul to extol the great sacrifice that Christ made.

<sup>19</sup> **For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him,** The Son of God was not a partial manifestation of the living God, but a perfect and full manifestation with nothing lacking. The word fullness means that in Christ the completeness of His deity was fully exposed. He was not a man merely endowed with special powers, but was the expression of the very essence and nature of God Almighty.

And the one who was the very essence of God, it is through Christ that God effected our reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> **and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.**

The same power that led to the creation of the world led to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that we could be reconciled to God. Notice that all things were created by Christ and through Christ and for Christ. And now, the only way that fallen creation and fallen humanity will be reconciled is through the power and purpose of God expressed in Jesus Christ. Creation is subject to futility. Men are in bondage to sin. And it is Christ who made a once for all payment to the Father. Jesus made peace on the cross by giving His very blood so that God's justice could be satisfied and we could experience forgiveness and cleansing. We were under a curse, but He took our curse and died our death. Then He rose from the dead. And now to all who turn to Him in unyielding faith get to experience this reconciliation. Jesus made peace, but we must repent and turn to Him in faith to experience that peace.

But then Paul makes sure that we understand that Christ's preeminence is not just in our salvation, but in the redemption of all things that have been created. Jesus is not only the agent by which all men experience God's forgiveness and cleansing, but is the agent by which "all things" experience the vast scope of his redemption and reconciliation. Paul tells us in his letter to Philippians (2:10) that even as day is coming when all things under the earth will one day bend the knee to Jesus. A day is coming when He is going to remake the heavens and earth and all things will be made right and all things will be made new. This is the Jesus that exists.

And that leads us to our third point about how **3. Christ is Preeminent**. The question we have to ask ourselves is - **Do we see it in our life?** Does Christ have His rightful place in my life? Does He have His rightful place in your life? In verse 18, Paul begins his shift from talking about Christ as the Creator to presenting Christ as the Redeemer. And as he does this, he really gives us the major emphasis of what he wants us to grasp by all of this. As I worked through vs. 18 earlier, I skipped over this phrase. But not I want you to focus on this extremely strong statement of eternal reality regarding the place Christ deserves. Look at the end of verse 18: **so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything**. Not only is Christ the Creator... He is your Creator! Not only is Christ the Redeemer... He is your Redeemer! And because of that, he deserves first place in my life, in your life, in everyone's life! Jesus Christ deserves first place in everything! Who Jesus is and what Jesus has done means He deserves all the glory and honor and power and thanksgiving. He alone is worthy. He is Lord of All and He deserves to have the first place, the preeminent position.

When we were coming back from China the plane we were on was hours late. And so it became obvious that by the time we got to the check-in counter, we were going to miss our connection in Newark and not be able to get back to KC when we had planned. What we didn't know was that when we started talking to the agent that the plane was also overbooked and that they weren't going to have seats for all of us on the plane. They did have a seat on a plane leaving on another airline immediately, but it was going to Chicago, and you would have to arrange your flights within the US there. So after a brief dialogue, we choose Rich to take that flight.

When we finally figured things out, the rest of us were put on flight to Washington DC that would end up flying us through Chicago and getting us home to KC on Sunday instead of Saturday. There wasn't really anything we could do about it, so we just went with the flow. Oh, as a perk, the only seats they had left were business class, so the three of us got upgrades. And let me tell you, that was nice! It was so comfortable and we were so spoiled, I almost felt guilty.

Now, imagine if you had paid for business class or for first class, but the stewardess wouldn't let you sit where you deserved! The stewards wouldn't let take the seat you purchased, but rather insisted that you sit back in coach. And then they kind of just forgot about you. Imagine what that would be like. It just wouldn't be right, would it?

That is what Paul is saying here. Jesus isn't like me. I got an upgrade I didn't deserve! But Jesus on the other hand is the creator of the airline and purchased the plane and really does deserve to have the best seat on the plane! And yet, in many of our lives, we aren't giving Christ the rightful place He deserves. It is like we have

tried to give Him a coach seat and want Him as a part of our life. Jesus isn't really the one and only of our lives, he is just the one of many things in our life.

Jesus deserves the first place, the preeminent place, the unrivaled place in your life. Your life shouldn't revolve around your job or your retirement or your degree. Jesus deserves first place. Your life isn't about that new car or nicer house or whatever else it is that attracts your eye. Jesus deserves first place. Your life doesn't revolve around your boyfriend or your girlfriend or even around your children. Jesus deserves first place in everything.

This morning, I want you to see that Jesus is the only worthy object of your faith. He is the only one worthy of letting have control of your life because He is the Creator and He is the Redeemer. But once you decide that He is the one and only worthy object for all of your passion, then what? How do you give Him first place in your life? That is what we will talk about over the next three weeks. We are going to talk about how to give Jesus first place in your life. We are going to talk about three steps you can take to passionately follow the one who is Lord of All and give Him His rightful place in your life and our church. Please join us for the next three weeks as we get imminently practical in how to follow Jesus.

Let's pray.

Works on Colossians used in preparing this message:

H.M. Carson's **Colossians and Philemon** - Tyndale NT Commentary

James D. G. Dunn's **The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon** - Eerdmans

John MacArthur Jr.'s **Colossians and Philemon** - Moody

F.F. Bruce's **The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Epheisians** - Eerdmans