

Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians V

Colossians 1:15-20

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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Let us pray. Our Lord, God almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we come to You praising You this day, because You are the Creator and the Sustainer, and through our Lord Jesus Christ, have become the Redeemer of Your people. We confess that You are the only true God, and that we are Your people, brought out of darkness and into Your wonderful light through faith in Jesus Christ. Work in us through the workings of the Holy Spirit by grace, we pray, O God, confession of our sins before You this day. We acknowledge that apart from Christ we are undone, and we acknowledge that even as believers we stumble in the way. And yet, by the Holy Spirit, You mortify sin in us and You vivify those graces that You have first implanted in us in regeneration. And so we confess our sins silently, and yet joyfully, for You have told us to come boldly into Your presence by the name of Christ. Receive our prayers and praises this day. Speak to us by Your word. Meet with us here. Reveal to us Your glory in the Sacrament and in the word of the living Scripture. And we pray, O God, cause our hearts to be drawn to You, for we ask it all in Jesus' name. Men.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians chapter 1, and we'll continue our study of this great book of the Apostle Paul. You'll remember that we had said in our studies in weeks past, that Paul is combating a teaching in Colossae that questions whether Christ is sufficient. It doesn't deny His lordship, it doesn't deny His supremacy, it simply says, 'you started well with Christ, but we can take you deeper in the faith, with deeper knowledge and deeper experience of God's power by following after certain teachings and rituals that had not been spoken of in the gospel of Christ first preached in Colossae.' And, we said, that the Apostle Paul responded to that from the very moment that he opened his word of greeting to the Colossians.

In his very greeting, he undercuts that teaching, and then in verses 3 through 8, he offers up a prayer of thanksgiving for what God is doing in the lives of the Colossians, and that undercuts this idea that there is something else other than Christ that these Colossians need for light as believers. And then, finally in verses 9 to 14, we saw him continue to pray specific things for these Colossians to know and experience as part of their belief in Christ. Last week, we said we

got to the main section of Paul's message. There, he began to set forth who Christ is, because as far as Paul is concerned, if we will simply learn who He is, so much of the rest of the Christian life will fall into place. If we will know Who it is that we love and serve, we will know that we don't need to go anywhere else other than Christ to find all the resources necessary for Christian growth and grace, for deeper knowledge of God, and for clearer experience of His power in our Lives. Having said that, let's look at Paul's words beginning in verse 15:

Colossians 1:15-22

Thus ends this reading of God's Holy word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's look to Him again in Prayer:

Our Lord, we do confess that this is Your word. Our hearts come to You this day in different conditions, some cold, some wounded, some disinterested, some apathetic, some under conviction, some in need of comfort, some in need of encouragement, some in need of instruction. Lord, we could go on, but You know better than we do. By Your Spirit, minister Your Word to each of us in his or her own condition. Draw us to Yourself. Quench the spiritual thirst in each of us. Kindle it if necessary, and we'll give You the praise and the glory. Open our eyes that we might behold wonderful things from Your Word, and cause us to glorify You in our response to Your Word, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Seems to me, that everybody on this planet has either one or another problems with Jesus Christ. Some people doubt His supremacy. Others doubt His sufficiency. Those who doubt the supremacy of Christ are normally non-Christians. They may be atheistic. They may be religious. They may be members of another religion or than Christianity, but they doubt what Paul claims here about the supremacy of Christ. They may honor Christ as a great moral teacher or as a prophet, but they do not believe that He is the Lord over all as the Apostle Paul is going to argue today. Others, perhaps within the Church, within the Christian fold, may acknowledge Christ's supremacy with their tongues, they may give assent to the idea that He is supreme, but they have questions as to whether He is sufficient. They continue to try and supplement Christ in their Christian experience. They start with Christ, but they move on to other things. Sometimes they move to their own works, and they think that they can begin with Christ and yet if they are going to stay in fellowship with God, they must supplement it by meriting God's favor, by earning His favor in their obedience. Other times they think that there is some deeper spiritual principle. Sometimes they actually mix Christianity with other types of belief. They mix it with something as seemingly crazy as astrology, or something more profound like some other form of religion, whether it may be a New Age teaching or they mix Christ with some secular teaching which is on the market. But there are many Christians who doubt the sufficiency of Christ. They believe in Christ, they profess His name, and yet in their experience, and even in their belief, they think that in order to have fullness of life, they need to supplement what they have in

Christ in something else. Paul is speaking precisely to those conditions today. We don't have time to do everything that Paul does in this glorious passage, but I want to point you today to four phrases in verses 15 through 20, and I want to look at those as closely as we possibly can. Let me mention them to you, and then we'll look at them.

In verse 15 and all the way down to verse 17, Paul asserts that Christ is the Lord of creation. If you look at verse 18, there Paul asserts that Christ is the head of the Church. In verse 19, Paul asserts that Christ is the fullness or that the fullness dwells in him. And then in verse 20, Paul says that Christ is the Reconciler, He is the one who reconciles the world to God. I want to look at those great phrases, those great assertions, those great truths that Paul sets forth here with you today. Before we do so, I'd like to remind you, however, of some interesting connection in these verses. I won't even be able to follow up on these connections, but perhaps you in personal Bible study, will be able to go back and look at some of these connections this week, because they are quite magnificent.

First of all, I want you to notice this week, look at these phrases today, at the connection between Christ's supremacy and Christ's sufficiency, according to the Apostle Paul. Christ is sufficient, Paul says, because He is supreme. He assumes that these Colossians, unlike the non-Christians that I spoke of a few moments ago, he assumes that these Colossians accept Christ's supremacy, that He is lord, that he knows that in their baptismal profession, they made a profession that Jesus is Lord. So he knows that they won't deny that He is Lord, but he wonders if they'll understand the implication of Christ being Lord, and Paul says the implication of Christ being Supreme, the implication of Christ being Lord, is that He is sufficient. He's sufficient for everything that you need for salvation. You don't need to look anywhere else, because He is supreme. Notice that connection between the supremacy and the sufficiency of Christ.

Secondly, notice the connection between Christ as Creator and Christ as Redeemer. If we were to lay out this passage side by side and put verses 15, 16, and 17 in one column, and then verses 18, 19, and 20 in another column, we would see a beautiful parallel. In each of those passages, we would see Paul repeat 4 phrases. In verse 15 and in verse 18, he uses the phrase "who is" to open that section. In verses 15 and 18, he speaks of Christ as the first-born. In verse 15, he calls Christ the first-born of creation. In verse 18, he calls him the first-born of the dead. In verses 16 and 19, he speaks of the phrase "for in Him" in Christ, and in verses 16 through 20, he uses the phrase "in the heavens and on the earth." In each of those phrases, he parallels Christ's lordship in creation with Christ's lordship in redemption. And he sees those as going together, being inseparably connected. Christ's lordship in creation enables Him to be a Redeemer who can redeem us from any force, for if He created creation, and if He is the Lord of creation, what is there in creation that He is not capable of redeeming us from, or of exercising dominion over? So Paul says Christ is both Creator and Redeemer.

Now one last thing I'd like to point to before we get to these great phrases, notice how often Paul repeats two phrases: "all things" and "he is." Look with me briefly in verse 15, "He is the first-born of all creation." Verse 16 "for by Him all things were created." And down further in that verse, "all things have been created by Him." Verse 17, "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." Verse 18 at the end, "that He might have first place in everything." In verse 19, "for all the fullness." And finally in verse 20, "through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, whether things in heaven or things on the earth." The Apostle Paul, you will remember, from our past studies, has already prayed that the Lord would give these Colossians all wisdom and knowledge of the Lord, and that they would experience all the divine power, and so over and over he repeats this phrase "all things." Why? To stress that all things have been subsumed under the rule, under the dominion of Christ, so that if the Colossians need to pray for something, they don't need to look anywhere else but Christ, because all things are His. He made it. He rules over all things. And then there's that phrase "He is." Notice in verse 15, "He is the Image of the invisible God." Verse 17, "He is before all things." Verse 18, "He is the head of the body." What is Paul repeating that for? Again, because he wants to stress to the Colossians that it is absolutely vital that they understand who Christ is. For if they will understand who He is, it will take them a long way down the path of spiritual growth, and it will protect them from the false teaching which says we need Christ plus something else, whether that is Christ plus another religion whether that is Christ plus our own meritorious works, whether that is Christ plus fill in the blank. If we will remember who He is, we will know that He is supreme and all-sufficient. And that is a message not just for the Colossians, but for us today.

And to that end, I would like us to look at those four great phrases together in verses 15 through 20 so that we might learn again, afresh, who Christ is, and would be. Therefore, edified in the faith, let's look at verses 15 through 20.

I. Christ: Lord of Creation.

First, Christ is the Lord of creation. Look at Paul's words, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together." What is Paul stressing there? He is stressing the supremacy of Christ over all of creation.

Now he does so much in that short passage and those few phrases, that we couldn't possibly do it all justice today, so let me zero in on a few things that he asserts about Christ in that passage. Christ is Lord of the creation. First of all notice, last week we looked at the phrase "He is the image of the invisible God and the first-born of all creation." And we said that in that phrase, Paul is

stressing that Jesus is very God. He is not something less than God. He is not the highest of created beings, He is not simply a great man, a good man, a good moral teacher, a philosopher, a prophet or anything else, He is very God. He is the image of the invisible God. He is a visible manifestation of deity. In Christ all the fullness of the Deity dwells in bodily form, as Paul will say in Colossians chapter 2 verse 9. That is so central to Paul's proclamation. Paul is not proclaiming a Christ who is a good man, who is an almost perfect man, who is a caring man, or a loving man, he is proclaiming more than that. He's proclaiming Christ who is both God and man: He is divine. He is the second Person of the Trinity, the eternal God in the flesh: He is God and man. He is perfectly Divine. This is so important for us to see. Paul sees it as central to his message. Today there are many people who belong to denominations of Christian churches that do not believe that Jesus is divine. They believe that Jesus was a good man. They believe that He had wise sayings. They believe that He had things that He taught that could help us in our daily living. But they do not believe that He is divine. As far as the Apostle Paul is Concerned, if Jesus is not Divine, we are undone. We might as well give it all up, pack it in and go home, because if Jesus is not divine, He cannot release us from the powers of darkness, He cannot free us from sin, He cannot bring us into the glorious light of God, and 'we are still in our sins,' the Apostle Paul says.

Jesus is divine and I want to remind you, especially you students, one day you're going to be in a university classroom, and a religion professor somewhere is going to tell you that the early Christians didn't believe that Jesus was God. Then they're going to tell you that the early Christians didn't believe that Jesus was divine. That was something that early Church gradually made up. My friends, these words were written less than three decades after our Lord walked this earth, and the Apostle Paul is reflecting a truth that the whole Christian community embraced, that Jesus Christ is very God.

When we say that He is the Son of God, we don't mean He's less than God, we mean he bears a special filial relationship to God. He is very God just like your sons and daughters are no less human than you. This Son of God is no less God than the heavenly Father. He is in eternal relationship with Him. He is very God, and that is at the very core of His ability to redeem us from sin. I want to tell you that in the early Church, it was three centuries before a heresy arose within Christian circles that denied that Jesus was divine. In fact, the early Church was so convinced that Jesus was divine, that the only heresy about the person of Christ which flourished within the Christian Church for the first three centuries was the denial that He was human.

The first heresy about Jesus Christ was a denial that He was human. No Christian would have questioned whether He was divine. The question was how could someone who is so clearly divine, truly be human? That's how convinced the early Christians were. Why? Because Christ himself had taught and claimed to be divine, and He had demonstrated that claim in His resurrection and in His

ascension. And His Apostles, to a man, all joined in the profession that Jesus is very God and the Apostle Paul sets that forth before us again.

He is the Lord of creation. Why? He made creation. He's the creator. Now Paul goes on and says a few other things in these few verses. Notice that he says that 'He is the creator of all things.' And he uses that word "all things" to stress that there was nothing that Jesus didn't create. Do you remember that some of these people who were teaching in Colosse would believe that there is a very sharp divide between matter and the spiritual world? They would have thought that the spiritual world was of higher value than the material world. They would think that the material world was insignificant or less spiritual or less valuable in the sight of God. In fact, some would actually teach that what is was positively bad, that the matter, the material world was bad. And they might have been tempted to think, 'well, Jesus may have been the creator of the world that we can see, the material world, but surely He wasn't the creator of the invisible world. Paul says He's the creator of all things, and what does he say, "visible and invisible." And just to make himself clear, he goes on and he throws this in, "of the heavens and of the earth, whether rulers or thrones or dominions or authorities." What is Paul doing? He's piling up words to tell you, 'look, you're not going to find something in creation that He didn't create. He's the Lord over creation. This is the One who our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Lord over creation.' And Paul doesn't stop there, he says, 'look, He's not only the One who created creation, but creation was created for Him.' Creation finds its reason for being in glorifying Him. Look at the glorious phrase there in Colossians chapter 1 verse 16, at the very end of the passage: "all things have been created by Him and for Him." He not only created it all, but they were created for Him, for His pleasure, for His glory. Their goal of being is to bring Him glory. Now the Apostle Paul says, because of that, He has a primacy over all creation. All things are upheld by Him. All things are held together by Him.

The philosophers look for their principle of coherence. The scientist, the chemist, the physicist, they look for the mystery of binding energy or binding force, and the Apostle Paul is saying, 'He's beyond all that, He is the thing in which the whole universe coheres. He holds it all together. He created it all. There is nothing in this universe that is outside of His Control. You can see these false teachers come in to the Colossians saying, 'you been saved from your sins by Christ, but now you need to be saved and freed from these demonic forces in the spiritual world.' The Apostle Paul says, 'nonsense! Christ is the Lord of all. If you are in Christ, you have been saved from those forces of darkness. You have everything you need to exercise dominion in Christ.'

II. Christ: Head of the Church

Secondly, in verse 18, we see this phrase, "Christ is the head of the Church." He is not only supreme over creation, Paul says, He's supreme in the Church. He is

the head of the body in the Church. He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. Notice what Paul stresses here. Christ is the head of the Church, He is the authority. He is the only head. He is the only Lord of the Church. My friends, that is the charter of freedom for you as a Christian, that you know that no human being can make up for you rules or teaching in the sphere of your Christian faith which have not been ordained by your Lord. You are free to be who your Lord intends you to be, and no man, however spiritual, may add to the commands of the Lord for what you are to be. That is your charter of freedom. So many people feel like they're bound, and they're groaning under the load of having to obey the Bible. Oh, that's so untrue, my friends. The Bible frees you from the foolish and capricious commands of men, for who has the authority to tell another man's servant how to serve. Who has the authority to tell Christ's servants, yea, his brothers and sisters, how they are to live and serve? The answer is, no one. He is the Lord over the Church, and when anyone claims to be the head of the Church, other than Christ, they are committing blasphemy against Christ. Whether that person be a leader of a great church and denomination, or whether that person be a person in a local church setting who is claiming to add commandments for the behaving of the Christian life, that Christ himself has not inaugurated and initiated. We are set free from the commandments of men, because Christ is the Lord in His Church. He is also the head of His Church in the sense that he is the source of all spiritual life in the body. Paul says He is the source, He's the head, He's the fountainhead of all spiritual life in the body. If you have life today as a believer, it's because you are united to Christ by faith. If you have life today, it is evidence that the work of the head of the body of Christ is at work in you.

Paul goes on, not only to say that He is the head, that He is the authority, that He's the source of the life of His people, and he goes on in verse 18 to say that "He is the first-born of the dead." This points to the resurrection of Christ, and he says that His resurrection is the ground of our hope. He's the first-born of the dead. Because He's raised from the dead, we have hope of resurrection. It is precisely because of the truth, because of the reality of Christ's resurrection, that we expect, that we hope, in the fullest sense of that word, as a Christian, that we hope for our resurrection. And the Apostle Paul says elsewhere, that "if Christ be not raised from the dead, we are of all people most miserable." We might as well eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. But Christ is raised, and Paul says that He is the first-born of the dead, and because He is the head of the Church, and because He is the first-born of the dead, because He's preceded us in resurrection, Paul says He has primacy in the Church. He has supremacy.

III. Christ: the Fullness

In those passages, verses 15 through 17, and in verse 18, Paul sets forth the supremacy of Christ. He knows that these Colossians believe in the supremacy of Christ, at least in theory, but they haven't understood its implications, and he

turns to the implications of it in verses 19 and 20. So what, Christ is Lord? So what? Here's Paul's answer to that question: verse 19, for "it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him. It was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him." Paul is arguing that because Christ is supreme, in creation and in redemption, therefore, He is sufficient, His person is sufficient. The person of Christ is sufficient for our redemption, and he uses this glorious, this mysterious phrase, "it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him." Now, how do we interpret that? That's a hard passage to interpret. Let me just say a couple of things.

First of all, "the fullness" is a word that the false teachers in Colossae liked to use. They liked to talk about this fullness that believers could attain if they would go through the mystic rituals. Isn't it interesting that the Apostle Paul fires back by saying, 'no, Christ is the fullness. You don't look somewhere else other than Christ for the fullness. You look in Christ for the fullness.'

Second interesting thing. If you were to turn over with me to Colossians chapter 2 verse 9, you would see the Apostle Paul say, "For in Him all the Fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form." There, the word "fullness" is stressing that in Christ is a fullness of divinity. He is fully divine. Now that may well be what Paul is driving at here in verse 19, but let me suggest something slightly different. Because in verse 19 it says, "it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him," and because it says it was the Father's good pleasure, or the Father's will for this fullness to dwell in Him, I'm not sure that Paul is talking about the deity of Christ. Paul's already asserted that. There's no question that Paul is teaching the deity of Christ here, but Christ is divine not because the Father wills it, but because in His essence He is divine. The Father doesn't will the Son to be divine. The Son is divine. So what is it that the Father is willing, what is His good pleasure? What kind of fullness is this that it's the Father's will for Christ to have? I suspect that Paul is talking about the honor and the glory and the reward which is due to Christ alone because He has fulfilled all the responsibilities of His office as our Savior, as our Mediator, the Mediator of the Covenant of Grace. Paul is speaking of that fullness which God has been pleased to give to His Son, because He is pleased beyond measure with the perfection of our Savior's obedience and sacrifice. That fullness is all found in Him. That fullness belongs to Him alone. In the words of Philippians 2, He is given "that name which is above every name" because He humbled Himself and because He took on the form of a servant, and because He died the death on the cross. And because He was raised again, He was exalted to that name above every name. This is speaking of God's Covenantal reward of His Son who is our Mediator. because He has fulfilled everything He told the Father He would do on our behalf. And that is so important, the Apostle Paul says, for this reason: We are told that in Him we are more than conquerors. We are hyper-conquerors. We are hyper-exalted. As He is hyper-exalted to the fullness of the Father because of the Father's pleasure in His obedience, we are exalted with Him. And the Apostle Paul is saying, 'You want the fullness?' You've got the fullness in Christ. Don't look somewhere else.

If you are in Christ, you will reign with Him in glory. You will be hyper-exalted. You will be hyper-conquerors. For in Him, all the fullness dwells by the Father's pleasure. There's nothing of glory and honor and blessing which is to be found outside of Christ.

IV. Christ: the Reconciler

And then finally, the Apostle Paul, in verse 20 stresses this: Christ is the Reconciler, the only Reconciler. Not only does he stress the supremacy of Christ in creation, not only does he stress the supremacy in the Church, not only does he stress the sufficiency of Christ's person, he stresses the sufficiency of Christ's work. He is the Reconciler. Through Him, God reconciled 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." As Christ is the creator, Paul says, He is also the Reconciler. As sin destroyed the relationship between creatures and the Creator, between man and God, so Christ restores that fellowship and relationship between man and God, and He does it through the death of His cross.

Now my friends, this is a stratagem of Paul's teaching, and it's a stratagem of God, and it's a stratagem of Christian theology. We can never leave out the Cross, because the cross tells us that we were already at enmity withgo, and the cross tells us that God provided a way back into fellowship with Him, and there is no way back into fellowship with God apart from that cross. There is no way to get to Him. There is a theology which has floated around in the Church for the last 100 years or so, which says that men really aren't sinners, and God isn't really a just God who is going to punish sin. He's really just an amiable grandfather in the sky who's going to bless everyone in the end, and so we need to put away all this stuff about sin and forgiveness and atonement and get on with it, and teach good moral teaching from the pulpit. But as far as the Apostle Paul, that is not true. Paul says that God has been reconciled to the world through the death of Christ on the cross. One theologian, many years ago, described this liberal theology which has no cross of Christ this way, He said, "a God without wrath," in this theology, "a God without wrath, brought men without sin into a kingdom without righteousness through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

That is not Christianity. This is Christianity. Christianity says that we have been estranged from God, and that we deserved to be judged, but through the atoning death of Christ, the wrath of God was quitted for all His people. And as we embrace Christ by faith, as we repent of our sins, as we turn to Him, we find in Him the blessing of all the benefits of reconciliation with God. Have you embraced Christ? Have you realized if you are apart from Christ, that you are at enmity with God? Have you realized that there is no way that you can be indifferent to God? You're either for Him or against him. You're either His or

you're not. If you are in Christ, have you recognized how sufficient He is? There's no need to go anyplace else, Paul says. He is the Creator. He is the Redeemer. He's the Reconciler. He's the fullness. It's all here in Christ. The Christian life, my friend, is a process of learning that truth, applied with all of Christ's word in his word, deeper and more consistently. We begin with Christ. We end with Christ. He is the Alpha. He is the Omega. Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, we commit ourselves to You this day. We ask that You would show us the truth of who Your Son is, and as we see Him in all His glory, we would embrace Him willingly, freely. If there are those who have come not knowing who He is, reveal Yourself to them through Him by the Word and by the Spirit.

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