

May 10, 2020

The Superiority of Christ

Colossians 2:8-15

Man-made religion may have the appearance of wisdom, but only Christ can reconcile sinners to God.

LTS: Eph. 2:11-22

When God reveals a precious truth to his people, he never intends for us to receive it merely as a piece of fine art to behold, to enjoy and to study. Rather, his intention is that by beholding, enjoying and studying those truths we would be moved to action. For believers, the end of all theology is that Christ would be glorified and that we would follow him more nearly and love him more dearly.

This approach of truth followed by an appeal to action is easy to see in Paul's letter to the Colossians. In the first 34 verses Paul paints a masterpiece of theological truth. Think of it as an abstract portrait of the Preeminent Christ depicted with a fine Scripture brush. Paul wants us to behold, enjoy, and think deeply about every stroke of this masterpiece.

Then, after taking in the glory of His Person and work, he expects us to respond in specific ways. He says, for example (2:6), "*As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him – Live in Him*" How should we walk in him? As we learned last time, we should engage in the dependent labor of growing deeper and stronger in the Faith while at the same time channeling the overflowing river of our thankfulness back to him.

The reason Paul wants us to engage in these active responses is because we (like the Colossians) live in a world where there are many false teachers attempting to trick us into believing that true Christian flourishing requires more than Christ. So, Paul is doing two things: He's warning us about false teaching and he's equipping us with the necessary truth to combat it; Namely, the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done.

This morning, Paul turns our attention back to that masterpiece of the preeminent Christ and draws the eyes of our hearts to that section of the portrait where Christ is depicted as reconciling sinners to God.

The timeless truth of this passage is that *while Man-made religion may have the appearance of wisdom, only Christ (and Christ alone) can reconcile sinners to God.*

But how, exactly, does Jesus reconcile sinners - like you and me - to God? Well, in the passage before us Paul points to six spiritual realities by which Christ has reconciled us to God - Six truths that no religious traditions, philosophies or superficial religious practices can ever begin to attain.

And by the way, these six spiritual realities are marked in the text by the classic biblical phrases that point to the doctrine of our Union With Christ. Those phrases are as follows:

In Him, In Him,
With him, with Him
With Him, and In Him

Why don't we begin this morning by standing and reading the passage together?

Read Col. 2:8-15

Now, we need to move through these divine truths rather quickly to finish in the time allotted this morning, so I suggest you listen quickly.

The question is, "How were believers reconciled to God?" But before we dive into the answers provided in this text, we should remind ourselves why Jesus is the only fitting object for our exclusive faith. The answer is (9) that *"In Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."* Ponder that for a moment.

I want you to think of the O.T. Tabernacle (also called the Tent of Meeting). After Moses erected it in the wilderness we are told (Ex. 40:34), "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle and Moses was not able to enter." You bet he wasn't able to enter! The visible manifestation of the glory of God in the O.T. was a pillar of cloud and fire! The tabernacle was the one place on earth where the blazing Shakina glory of God took up residence among men.

What Paul is saying here is that that same Shekinah glory – the very presence of God - has taken up residence in a man – Jesus Christ. In that sense – think about this – the man Christ Jesus as he lived on earth was the real the temple (Tabernacle) of the Lord!

“For in Him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily.” And by the way, the apostle John alludes to this when he says in John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and tabernacle among us. And we beheld His glory – glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth. The point is, within the man Christ Jesus is the whole fullness of deity!

- That’s what the story of Jesus calming the storm was all about!
- That’s what feeding the 5,000 was all about!
- That’s what walking on water was all about
- That’s what raising Lazarus from the dead was all about!
- That’s what giving sight to the blind was all about!
- All of it was to show that the Man Christ Jesus is very God of very God.

Do you see why I said that Paul’s portrait of Jesus is a masterpiece? But there’s more! Now we are ready to tackle the six spiritual realities by which Christ has reconciled us to God.

I. We are Filled in Him (10)

Read v. 10

1. Not only has God taken up residence in the man, Christ Jesus, but now Jesus has taken up residence in you! The text clearly says, *“And you have been filled in him,” which I believe is just another way for Paul to say that we are United with Christ. Remember, the Mystery in chapter 1 is Christ in You. The hope of glory.”*

2. Beloved, this, in a nutshell, is what it means to be born again. We are redeemed, regenerated, saved, justified, and converted when God in his mercy causes us to be united with Christ. He is in us and we are in Him. That is how God thinks of you if you are one of His. Second,

II. We are circumcised in Him (11)

Read v. 11

1. Circumcision was a big deal in Israel. The law of God clearly taught that circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Israel. To be uncircumcised was to be excluded from the covenant community. Of course, you know that the church of Colossae was largely (perhaps exclusively) populated by Gentiles. So, in 1:21 Paul describes their former state as "Alienated and hostile in mind." Gentiles were on the outside looking in. That's what it means to be uncircumcised. And historically, no uncircumcised man could enter the temple. That means, all Gentiles were even excluded from the physical place of God's presence.
2. So how did Jesus reconcile them to God? "Paul tells them: In him you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands." The phrase, "Made without hands" means that Jesus provided a spiritual circumcision.
3. In reality, however, this is what God always wanted for his people. In Deut. 30:6 just as Yahweh was having Moses rehearse the Law of God, we read, "*And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*"
4. O.T. Israelites fell into the error of thinking that what God offered was surgical salvation. But in God's mind, sin and righteousness are always matters of the heart. Heart circumcision is the peeling away of that which is dead and useless to our relationship with God. It is the act by which God grants you a new heart that is alive and responsive to God and loves God.
5. How did God provide this for us? Paul says (11) "*By putting off the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.*" What is the circumcision of Christ? Paul is NOT speaking of when Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day after his birth in the temple. Rather, in this context he is talking about the removal of the flesh of his body. The removal of what was dead and useless. Specifically, he meant Jesus' death on the cross.¹ The death of Jesus in our place is the means by which the sinner's heart is circumcised, cleansed and transformed. And this brings us to the third means by which Christ reconciled us to God. Paul says...

¹ E.K. Simpson and F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of Ephesians and Colossians*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1957)

III. We Have Died with him (12)

He writes, “*Having been buried with him in baptism.*”

1. We know that spiritual circumcision points to Jesus’ death because the next thing he mentions is burial. Because you now live in Union with Christ, the way God thinks of you is that when Christ died, you died. That is how identified you are with Christ in the mind of God.
2. The doctrine of substitutionary atonement teaches us that Jesus made atonement (or reconciled us to God) by taking the punishment, the wrath, the retributive justice that we deserved upon himself when he died on the cross. Why? Because, according to God’s holy law, the wages of sin is... DEATH.
3. If Jesus were going to save us from God’s holy justice, the only just way to do was to die and be buried in our place. So, Jesus died on the cross, after which, he was laid in a tomb for you. And on that day, God saw you as united with Jesus in his death. But that’s not all. The fourth thing Jesus did to reconcile us to God was to rise again from the dead

IV. We were raised with him (12)

1. Verse 12 says, “*Having been buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with Him by faith in the powerful working of God.*”
2. We need to observe here that Paul is not speaking of water baptism any more than he is speaking of physical circumcision. The baptism Paul is speaking of is our spiritual baptism into Christ. Notice the past tense: *Having been buried with him.*” He is referring to the day when God immersed you into Christ. The day you were United with Christ.
3. Listen to how Paul describes it in Romans 6:3. He says,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

4. Note that last phrase: “In order that we too... might walk in newness of life.” Paul implies that the result of dying with Christ and rising with Christ is that our lives would never be the same. Not only do we have a new relationship with God, but we have a new relationship with sin. He says (Rom. 6:9 “Sin no longer has dominion over.”

5. Beloved, what Paul wants us to see is that Union with Christ is at the very heart of our salvation! And Paul mentions it again at the end of Romans 3 when he famously writes, “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life In Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

6. Back in Colossians 2, then, Paul summarizes in verse. 13 by writing, “*And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him.*”

7. And that brings us to the 5th thing Jesus did to reconcile us to God.

V. We are Forgiven in Him (13b-14)

1. Paul writes, “*having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross.*”

2. Because Jesus bore all of our sins in his body on the cross, all our sins have been forgiven. What is sin? James tells us that sin is any transgression of the law of God. But, of course, since the law of God is merely a reflection of his infinite perfections of the Person of God, there is no way any of us were going to be able to fully obey it. Everything we did only plunged us deeper into debt against God’s law. Its legal demands called for our condemnation. So, what hope could there be that anyone of us could be saved?

3. Here is our hope. When Jesus bore all of our sins on the cross, God (as it were) took the record of your debt and every breach of God’s holy law and nailed it to the cross.

4. When Pontius Pilate had his soldiers nail that placard on the cross declaring “Jesus of Nazareth: King of the Jews, no one could have known that along with that placard was another invisible one that named every law of God that you had ever broken. God himself nailed it to the cross declaring, “This man, Jesus, is

dying NOT for any sins of his own, but for yours.” All my guilt is laid upon him so I could be set free and declared righteous in God’s sight -in Christ.

5. And if that were not glorious enough, Paul tells us of one more thing that he did for our reconciliation to God. He not only purchased our forgiveness, but in doing so he conquered all our spiritual enemies.

VI. We are rescued from our enemy in Him

1. The apostle Peter tells us that Satan is roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. He is a powerful enemy. But when Jesus died on the cross and rose again, he defeated the devil and all his minions.

2. Back in v. 9 we were told that we are filled in Him who is the head of all rule and authority. Jesus is the King of kings, and Lord of lords. He rules over all. Before he ascended into heaven he declared, “All authority is given to me in heaven and in earth...” And at the cross, the greatest battle against the enemy of our souls was fought and forever won. So, in v. 15 we read, “*God disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in Him.*”

3. In Roman times, when a general was successful in battle he would ride into Rome with great pomp and circumstance with his army in his train. And at the end of the train there would be a line of men shackled and stumbling along together. These were the leaders of the conquered enemy. They would be set on display, humiliated, and killed. This is the imagery Paul is using. He wants us to see Jesus not merely as our silent sacrifice, but as our conquering king who has vanquished all the enemies of our soul.

4 Jason and I were discussing this picture of Christ earlier in the week and he reminded me of that famous scene in C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* the children are listening to Mr. Beaver describe what Aslan, the great lion King of Narnia is like and explains that they will soon meet him. To which, young Lucy asks, “Is he safe?” “Safe?” Mr. Beaver responds, “Course, he’s NOT safe... But he’s good.” And Oh how good our King has been to us.

5. Having looked at this masterpiece of the Preeminent Christ, do you understand a little better why Paul says that nothing else is needed for Christian Flourishing than Christ? In Him alone dwells the whole fulness of deity. He has made us complete in Him. And by his finished work on the cross we are reconciled to God.