

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Paul, Christ's Apostle"

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 5/31/09

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Last time we introduced the book of Colossians, and today as we continue we'll get into the letter itself by looking at Paul's greeting to the church at the very beginning of the book. But before we do that, I want to give you a more detailed outline of the book of Colossians than I did last time. Last time we talked at a very high level about the subject matter of each of the four chapters, but today I'd like to give you an actual outline of the book. I think it's important for us to have the framework of the book in mind as we study it together.

Just about every commentary on the book of Colossians gives an outline of some sort, and some of them are far better than others. The best ones don't try to impose a structure on the book, but instead the best outlines simply tell you what the Word of God says. And that's what I would like to try to do with the outline I'm about to give you. I developed this outline without first looking at what other commentators had to say, and then I went back and compared mine with several of theirs.

And by the way, I think that's generally a good approach for your own personal study of the Scriptures. Prayerfully go to the unadulterated Word first, and ask the Lord by the indwelling Holy Spirit to help you to understand what it has to say. And then, and only then, go and look at commentaries or study Bibles and see what they have to say.

After I developed an outline of the book of Colossians for this series, I then consulted other commentators, about fifteen of them. And I found some that I think had a good outline, and others that did not. Now no outline is perfect, and

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mine certainly is not. No one's outline is inspired. But the interesting thing that I noticed was that the commentators who did not have a good outline, just missed the main point of the book, and that main point is the preeminence of Jesus Christ. And the commentators who did a better job of outlining Colossians focused their attention on that main theme – Christ above all. And I'm indebted to those men because their outlines helped me to refine my own, and I want to give it to you now.

I've phrased this outline as a series of propositional statements – a series of declarations, if you will. And let me first give you the main headings of the outline, the main declarations, and then we'll come back and fill in the underlying points.

So for those of you who may be taking notes, the first main point, which we find in Colossians chapter 1, is that Jesus Christ is the Way. Jesus Christ is the Way. Or to put it a different way, Colossians chapter 1 is Christ's preeminence declared. Christ's preeminence declared.

The second main point, which we find in Colossians chapter 2, is that Jesus Christ is the Truth. Jesus Christ is the Truth. Or to put it a different way, Colossians chapter 2 is Christ's preeminence defended. Christ's preeminence defended.

The third main point, in Colossians chapters 3 and 4, is that Jesus Christ is the Life. Jesus Christ is the Life. Or to put it a different way, Colossians chapters 3 and 4 are Christ's preeminence demonstrated. Christ's preeminence demonstrated.

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So once again, in chapter 1, Jesus Christ is the Way. His preeminence is declared. In chapter 2, Jesus Christ is the Truth. His preeminence is defended. And in chapters 3 and 4, Jesus Christ is the Life. His preeminence is demonstrated.

So let's drill down into each of these three main headings. Under the main heading in chapter 1 – Jesus Christ is the Way, His preeminence is declared – there are 4 sub-headings.

First, in verses 1 through 14, we find that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Gospel. Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Gospel.

Second, in verses 15 through 17, we find that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Creation. Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Creation.

And third, in verses 18 through 23, we find that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Church. Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Church.

And fourthly, in chapter one verses 24 through 29, we find that Jesus Christ is preeminent in genuine ministry. Jesus Christ is preeminent in genuine ministry.

And then in chapter 2, under the overall heading that Jesus Christ is the Truth, we have Christ's preeminence defended. And Paul defends Christ's preeminence against three dangers that just about every individual Christian, and just about every local church, will face sooner or later.

First, there is the danger of empty philosophies instead of Christ, in chapter 2 verses 1 through 10. The danger of empty philosophies instead of Christ.

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Second, there is the danger of legalism instead of Christ, in chapter 2 verses 11 through 17. The danger of legalism instead of Christ.

And thirdly, there is the danger of man-made doctrines instead of Christ, in chapter 2 verses 18 through 23. The danger of man-made doctrines instead of Christ.

So in chapter 2, the Apostle Paul defends the preeminence of Christ against those three dangers, and he declares the preeminence of Christ as the sure cure for vain philosophies, and for legalism, and for man-made doctrines.

And then in chapters 3 and 4, under the overall heading of Jesus Christ is the Life, we have Christ's preeminence demonstrated. And Paul says that the preeminence of Christ must be demonstrated in the believer's life, and in the life of the church, in 6 ways.

First, Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's conduct. We have that in chapter 3 verses 1 through 11. Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's conduct.

Second, Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's character. We find that in chapter 3 verses 12 through 17. Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's character.

Third, Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's home. We find that in verses 18 through 21. Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's home.

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Fourth, Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's work. Paul addresses this in chapter 3 verse 22 through chapter 4 verse 1. Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's work.

Fifth, Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's witness. We find this in chapter 4 verses 2 through 6. Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's witness.

And finally number six, Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's service. We find this in the rest of chapter 4, verses 7 through 18. Christ must be preeminent in the Christian's service.

Before we begin looking at Paul's greeting in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 1, I want to make just this additional comment about the structure of the epistle to the Colossians. The pattern that Paul follows in this epistle is the pattern he follows in all of his nine letters to the various churches. He presents sound doctrine first, and right living second. And the reason for that is that sound doctrine is the basis for sanctified living. Sound doctrine is the basis for sanctified living.

So Paul uses the first two chapters of Colossians mainly to present doctrine; to teach the Colossian believers. First of all, he reminds them of what they already know about the Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation they possess because they have believed on Him. He encourages them to hold on to what they already know. He affirms them in that truth. He strengthens their confidence in that truth.

And then Paul builds on that truth. He takes them more deeply into the truth. He builds on the knowledge they already have, in order to deepen their knowledge of Biblical truth. But Paul doesn't do that just to stuff their heads full of spiritual

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facts. That would do the Colossian believers no good, and in fact it might do them harm if they became puffed up and proud because of their spiritual knowledge.

But that is not Paul's purpose at all. After instructing the believers in sound doctrine in chapters one and two, Paul uses chapters three and four of Colossians to teach the believers about sanctified living. And the instruction he gives them in right living is firmly and deeply rooted in the right doctrine that he has been teaching them in the first two chapters. The hinge-point of the book of Colossians is chapter 3, beginning at verse 1: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

"If then you were raised with Christ" could also be translated, "Since you were raised with Christ." That's the Greek grammar of that particular sentence. Paul is saying, "Because the things I told you in the first two chapters are true – that Jesus Christ is God, that he is your Savior, that you were redeemed by Him and raised to newness of life in Him – because these things are true of Christ and of you, this is how you should live. Yes, you need to take hold of Biblical truth intellectually. But then you need to take what you know, and apply it to the way you live.

The Apostle Paul does the same thing in his letters to the other churches. For instance, in the book of Romans, out of 16 chapters he spends the first 11 chapters instructing the church in sound doctrine. And then he begins chapter 12 with this transition, this hinge-pin if you will: "I beseech you therefore, brethren" – I

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beseech you, because of all the things I've just been explaining to you – "by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

Because these doctrines are true, dear saints of God, Paul is saying, because God has been merciful to you in salvation, live in a different way. Think in a different way. Not just in some things, but in everything. And that is the same thing Paul is saying here to the church at Colosse. Since you have been raised with Christ, think a different way, and live a different way.

And Paul begins the epistle to the Colossians with this greeting, chapter 1 verses 1 and 2: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Notice first of all, in verse 1, how Paul, the principal human writer of this epistle, identifies himself. He says that he is "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." As we look at other passages of Scripture we find that he does this for a very specific reason. There were Jewish legalists who had gained influence in this region of Asia, and apparently they were spreading the accusation that Paul was not a genuine apostle, and that he had assumed the title of apostle without God's authority. And so here in verse 1 Paul identifies himself as "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." He asserts it. He declares it as a fact.

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Now as we study Scripture we find that Paul identifies himself in a very similar way in most of his other eight letters to the churches. He also identifies himself as an apostle of Christ in his personal letters to Timothy and Titus. Let me just mention two examples. In the first verse of the book of Galatians, he identifies himself as "Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead)." In his first letter to Timothy he identifies himself as "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, by the commandment of God our Savior and the Lord Jesus Christ." And of course, Paul is referring to the commandment he received directly from the Lord Jesus Christ in the ninth chapter of Acts when the Lord confronted him on the road to Damascus.

In the book of Galatians, Paul spends considerable time in the first and second chapters in both asserting and defending his apostleship. That was because Galatia had become a real hotbed of false teaching, and it seems that many in the Galatian church had bought into this false accusation against Paul. But in this letter to the Colossian church, Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit considers it sufficient to identify himself as, and assert himself to be, "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God."

It is important for the Colossian believers to understand that the man who is writing to them is writing under the direct authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that what he will have to say to them will carry the weight of Christ's own authority, and it will require the attention and submission that goes with that kind of authority.

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So here, from the very first sentence of the book of Colossians, we have Christ's preeminence declared. Paul is not exalting himself. He never does that. He is exalting the Lord Jesus Christ here in Colossians, just as he does everywhere in his letters and in the book of Acts. It is because of Christ Himself that I came to saving faith, Paul will say. It is because Christ Himself confronted me, and called me, and commanded me to do what I am doing. That is the stamp of genuine apostleship. Every true apostle was called by the Lord Jesus Christ personally. And every true apostle spent time being instructed by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Now you might ask, how could that be true of Paul? He wasn't converted until after Jesus ascended to Heaven? And that's true. So how could he have received his training and instruction directly from Christ? We have the answer over in the book of Galatians, and I'd like for you to turn there with me for a moment. Galatians chapter 1, beginning at verse 11:

11. But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

13 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.

14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

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15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace,

16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood,

17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days.

19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

20 (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.)

21 Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia.

22 And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ.

23 But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy."

24 And they glorified God in me.

1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me.

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The sum of what Paul is saying is this: After Christ confronted me on the road to Damascus and I was saved, I received the things that I am teaching you by direct revelation from Him. Look at verse 12 once again – “For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.” And, Paul says, it was not until much later that I went up to Jerusalem, and I met with Peter first, and then James.

And then after 14 years Paul went there again. And if we were to read on in Galatians, and also in the parallel account in the book of Acts chapter 15, we would find that Paul went up to what we know as the council at Jerusalem, where the great doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works was fully declared. And we find Paul and the other apostles discovering that they were all preaching the same Gospel – the same doctrine. They had all received it directly from Christ – the other eleven during the three years of Jesus’ earthly ministry, and the Apostle Paul during the three years he spent receiving instruction directly from the Lord in Arabia.

Paul speaks and writes under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The Colossian believers needed to submit to that authority. And in the same way, we as believers today need to be willing to submit to the authority of the book of Colossians – and not just the book of Colossians, but all of Scripture. This is not the word of a mere man. This is the Word of God. This is the Word of Jesus Christ. And it was Paul’s desire for the Colossians, and it is my desire for you today, that you will “let the Word of Christ will dwell in you richly in all wisdom.”