

The Preeminence of Christ Declared

Colossians 1:21-29

Russ Kennedy

How will you have a lifestyle that is pleasing to God in every area of life? How will you grow in knowing God's will? How will you increase in wisdom? How will you do this *the way Bible says*?

Most Christians want the answer to those questions. But the questions are being answered in all kinds of ways that are not Biblical. Sadly, many have answered those questions with methods that deny the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ. They do not believe the gospel is for *the Christian life*.

But how is the question. Not what. We have agreed on the what from Paul's writing. But how will this happen? This is what everyone wants to know. And Paul tells us...

Three key ideas in the text before this one set the stage. The gospel has many important element. Here are three that prepare us for what we will consider today. There is a general reconciliation where the blood of the cross was shed to reconcile the universe.

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

The gospel involves the incarnation of Christ (v.19). Jesus is fully God and fully man.

The gospel involves the plan and purposes of the Father (v.20a). The Father chose to reconcile heaven and earth to Himself, through Jesus. The creation will be returned to glad conformity to the creator.

The gospel centers on the cross of Jesus (v.20b). All the Father does in His work in creation is done through or because of, the cross.

Now, how then will you grow in knowing, believing and understanding that? Because the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ is regularly proclaimed. It is preached...

In Relation to Gospel Salvation (v.21-23)

²¹ And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

What We Were (v.21)

The gospel first declares what we were before we were saved. Notice the words. Alienated, hostile in mind (thinking, attitude). We were doing evil. All of us. All of you. This is a description of the unbeliever.

Unsaved people are not neutral. They may seem like “good” people. But the Bible consistently pictures them as being hostile against God. They are described as enemies, rebellious, God-rejecting. There is an inward poise, a heart, a way of thinking, a mindset that is hostile to God. This expresses itself outwardly in evil deeds. The sin that people do is because, according to this text, they are against God. There are other reasons as well. But here, Paul is focusing on the alienation and hostility in the hearts of unbelievers.

This was you become you were converted. This may be some of you now. All your religious good deeds, your moralism, your sins, your small wickedness are simply expressions of your alienation from God and your hostility against Him. Further evidence of that? You are bristling right now at these words.

What Christ has Done (v.22)

Since we are alienated and hostile in mind, gospel declares what God has done in Christ. There are many aspects of Jesus’ saving working. A very important one is the God’s reconciliation of us through Jesus. He brings us back to Himself. God has reconciled all things to Himself (1:13). God has also reconciled hostile sinners to Himself. How? By Jesus coming to earth, living and dying in a human body. Jesus’ death on the cross was how God reconciled hostile sinners. There is no other way. The only way back to God is through Christ.

The second aspect that God has justified us. He has declared us to be righteous in His sight. Paul expresses this truth here by saying that we are presented perfect, faultless, blameless before Him. One of the purposes of Christ’s work on the cross is so that, for sure, you who believe and bow to Jesus will be presented before God and will be holy, blameless, and above reproach. This is not because of anything you have done. This is just simply because Jesus has satisfied all of God’s demands because of your sins.

These are not goals or aims. These are what God does for us. These are absolutely from God and God alone for us. That God has reconciled us deals with our alienation from and hostility against Him. That God has justified us deals with the evil deeds that we have committed against Him.

What it Produces (v.23a)

This is stated as a condition, *if*. “...if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard...” Now, you have stop and listen carefully to what the text is saying. Let me state it more in the way it is meant. If you continue in the faith, then **you are** (not will be) saved and if you are saved, you will continue in **the faith**. Those who continue to believe the faith, are firmly and unswervingly assured by the gospel, prove that they are saved.

This is a test to see who truly believes. Those who have been chosen by God and have been born again, regenerated by the Spirit of God will not fail this test, this condition. But part of the way they meet the condition is by hearing it.

We tend to put emphasis and the theological argument on the “if”. The author’s emphasis is on the faith and the hope, meaning assurance, of the gospel. So, this is not intended to scare people into good works. This is intended to encourage people who are holding firm, unmoved in the faith so that they have gospel assurance. This is the source of assurance of our salvation. It is NOT in what I do. It is NOT something I can lose or fall away from. I know I am saved, you can know you saved, because you are not and will not stop believing the faith and the gospel.

But I would contend that is use of this text, but not its primary purpose. Paul is basically saying, because of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, that saved people *stick with the faith and gospel to lead a life pleasing to the Lord*. In other words, those who embrace what the traveling teachers were offering were unstable and shifting away from the faith and the gospel they heard. What does that mean? That means their salvation, their reconciliation and their justification are in question.

What does this mean for you? Do you have a gospel-based assurance of salvation? Is your assurance firmly and unmovably rooted in Jesus’ transaction on the cross for you? Or is your assurance grounded in your own transaction(s) with God? You know you are saved because you did this, prayed that, saw this, had this experience, then your faith is not rooted in the gospel. If you ask me if I have assurance of my salvation my answer would be yes, because Jesus has died and was raised for me so that God has reconciled and justified me. That confession is belief. But it is not “self-aware”. It is God and Jesus and gospel aware.

How We Learned the Gospel (v.23b)

What gospel will grant them this kind of rock-solid assurance? What gospel will give them total confidence that every believer has all that is needed to be pleasing to God?

²³ if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

The assurance, hope giving gospel identified 3 ways.

It was personal...

It is the gospel that they heard. It is what Epaphras preached to them and under which they came to be saved. The new gospel, the higher-life gospel, the inner-enlightenment gospel is not what they believed to be saved. They must be sure that they are believing the gospel by which they were saved.

It was universal...

The true gospel is what was preached everywhere. They were not shortchanged some way. They heard what everyone was hearing all over the world.

It was apostolic...

The true gospel is that which Paul served. Paul is not making a case for himself here. He is making a case for the gospel. Any other teaching of the faith or the gospel that is not fully sourced in the Apostolic teaching is not true. I remind you that Paul here is concerned, not just the gospel for salvation, but also and even primarily for living a life pleasing to God.

Want to know whether what you believe is the real thing? Then who did you hear it from? Is it consistent with the Biblical gospel preached everywhere to everyone? Most importantly, is it the Apostolic gospel? Is it personal, universal and Biblical?

In Relation to Gospel Ministry (v.24-25a)

At the center of the Biblical gospel is the apostle's experience and expression of it. What follows is astonishing when you think about it. Listen to what Paul wrote.

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Paul is saying that the gospel is ultimately about Christ and the church. He has focused on Christ in the gospel. Now, he turns to the church under gospel, under the truth of the Word.

The Servant of the Church (v.25)

The gospel frames an attitude toward suffering. Paul rejoices that what God has put him through, the suffering he has experienced related to Christ's sufferings and the church's needs. His suffering is not redemptive. But it is incarnational. It is sacrificial. It is sanctificational. Paul sees his life through the lens of the cross. His own aim to be pleasing to the Lord in all things did and will take him through suffering deeply connected to the cross. So will yours. Gospel hope and assurance is meant to fill you with joy in the midst of real, personal, incarnational, suffering for the church. Is this how you think about? Would you dare to believe this? To live this?

The gospel creates an available servant. He is willing to serve God in the church at all costs. All of us who are in the body of Christ are servants. It is not what you can become. Like sonship, it is your identity. So, the question is not, "Will be a servant?" The question is, "What kind of servant are you?" Look in the mirror when you get home. Talk to your family, your friend, your elder... Say, "Am I a serving servant?"

The gospel involves an accountable stewardship. As an apostle who is serving the church, Paul has been given a stewardship. He will be accountable for the kind of serving he does. This is not unique to the Apostolic office. It is universal. Paul is accountable to God *as a servant*, just like you are. That is serious and sobering thought. You, a servant, saved by God, what have you done with the stewardship God has given you? Not as a matter of law, but rather of life and love, that is, by grace.

The Revelation to the Church (v.26-27)

The traveling teachers were offering a mystery, insider information and enlightenment that effectively undermined the truth of the gospel and the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Paul does not simply deconstruct, dismantle, destroy it. He relocates it. The mystery is not “up there” but rather is “back there.”

The true mystery, hidden in the Old Testament, but now is openly revealed to the church. The church was being enticed to believe current mysteries only revealed to a select few. This is wrong. The only mystery is what God hid in the words and pages of the Old Testament. But now it is revealed to the whole church.

The mystery is not about some deep life, higher spirituality. The mystery is about God sending the gospel to Jew and Gentile. It is inclusive in the true Biblical sense. It is the opposite of the exclusive brand of fake gospel being peddled by the traveling teachers. We would recognize this as all the different forms of second works of grace teaching. In our day, it is dominated by the Charismatics and their baptism of the Spirit, anointing of the Spirit, 2nd work of grace. All of these, intentional or not, are denying the full sufficiency of Christ in the gospel. There is no secret to the Christian life. There is mystery. The truth of how to be pleasing to God in all of your life is revealed clearly in the New Testament. Our problem is that it is not commonly taught, is not commonly known, and therefore is not commonly believed. This happens, not because it is hidden but because we really don't believe the wide aspect of the gospel is actually enough for the Christian life.

The mystery itself is about the riches and the hope of glory by Christ indwelling the church, God's people. I do not think this is referring to an individual indwelling by Jesus. It is referring to Christ making the church, comprised of God's people, His dwelling place. We are His temple, living stones. In the Old Testament God dwelt with and among His people. His visible dwelling in the world was in the Jewish tabernacle and temple. But now that is fulfilled in the corporate dwelling of God. He is still in and among *His* people. Therefore, we are individually indwelt by the Spirit and corporately indwelt by Christ.

The Preaching to the Church (v.28)

What then is the center, the focus of preaching to the church?

²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

What is Paul primarily concerned that the church hears? It is proclamation. It is preaching that is centered on Christ, not centered on other subjects or concerns. This is intended to set Christ as the primary subject of our preaching. In effect, Paul is saying we do not proclaim our... (fill in a long list of stuff). The traveling teachers were preaching their ideas, their methods, their secrets. Paul is not preaching "Pauline theology" or "Pauline method of sanctification." Paul's preaching centered on Christ, who He is and what He has done. Jesus is not the *only* subject of his preaching. But Christ is the primary subject.

I must pause and address a misunderstanding that has arisen over Christ-centered preaching. What we aim for and what we aspire to is preaching over time and over texts that keeps Christ as the main subject. This does not mean that every sermon will be about Jesus. My aim is to do what the text is doing. If the text is about Jesus, the sermon will be about Jesus. If Jesus is in the text, then Jesus will be in the sermon. If the text legitimately brings us to the whole of who Jesus is or what Jesus accomplished, then that will be a part of the sermon. It is the text that will drive the sermon. The call in the Scripture and our commitment then is to preach the Word. And in preaching the Word, we will proclaim Christ. Just not in every sermon. If you have questions about this, come ask me.

Paul highlights both the message and the method of his preaching. What will be in Biblical preaching as defined in this text?

There will be admonition, warning. Preaching must warn you, correct you, admonish you or it is not Biblical. Preaching will be for things and will be against things. This idea that preaching will always sooth, always make you feel good, always be uplifting simply will not align with the Bible.

The preaching will be instruction, teaching. Everywhere in the New Testament where preaching is modeled or discussed, it always, without fail, involves teaching. Look at the New Testament itself. How much of it has teaching involved in it? Preaching will have a significant amount of content and that content needs to be from and following the text.

The preaching will be done in a wise way. Wisdom will be applied in the sermon making and writing decisions. In the same way the New Testament books are different because of the author, so preaching will be different from different people. Wisdom will be used to know what texts to select, how to understand them, how to they inform our faith and how we ought to live.

The preaching has an important purpose. The Word, revealed, served, preached is all aimed to bring everyone to maturity. Maturity is when people, knowing the Word, walk in wisdom in all areas of life and thus are pleasing to God. This

is the ultimate aim of preaching. This is why the faith, the truth about the gospel and about Christ, is central to preaching. Without it, you cannot really become mature in the Biblical sense.

Now, notice the repeated emphasis on this section. It is about the Word, the gospel, being to everyone, for everyone, so that everyone will grow up.

In Relation Gospel Toil (v.29)

What is the responsibility of those who preach? Paul models it for us.

²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Our Hard Work

Listen to the words. Do you hear them? Toil that is, labor, sweat, grind, struggling like someone lifting or pulling a heavy weight. This is the norm for those dedicated to preaching. But more than this. What is the “this” for which Paul is laboring and working? We are working hard so that you will become mature. How are we working hard at? Through the kind of preaching that we see Paul committed to.

God's Powerful Work

This hard work is accomplished through the energy that powerfully works in us. We are working because God is working in us. I want to keep at the hard and wonderful work of preaching as long as God is powerfully working on me. We do not want to do our hard work just in the power of the flesh. We want to power of the Spirit to enable our studying, our meditating, our writing, and our preaching.

Reflect and Respond

Do you believe and understand the gospel? I am serious. Don't give me your pat, “I'm ok” answers. They won't cut it. Do you believe that Jesus is sufficient for your salvation and sanctification? Do you believe that Jesus is supreme in every sphere of life so that you submit to Him completely? That is the gospel. It is not merely the death and resurrection of Jesus.. It is His ascension and rule from heaven. So, do you believe the gospel in an obeying way?

Do you really understand the problem and danger your unbelieving family and friends are in? So you see them through the lens of the Bible? Do you even interpret your pre-conversion life Biblically? My self-righteousness, goody-two-shoes, religious good works were how I expressed my hostility against God...

We are committed to the kind of preaching Paul did. It is Biblical, textual, true to the Word, gospel saturated, Christ exalting proclamation with warning, instruction aimed at you growing up in Christ.

Do you see how Biblical preaching is connected to your growing in knowing God's will, increasing in wisdom so that you are pleasing to God? What steps will you take to prepare for, to really listen, to think about, to learn, to respond to the preaching you hear from this pulpit?

Do you appreciate the hard work that goes into the teaching and preaching ministries here at the Chapel? Do you come as one ready to change or poised to criticize?

Will you trust that Jesus is sufficient for you and supreme over you even in the ministry of the Word to you?