

Rich Nathan
December 11, 2022
Colossians Series
Colossians 1:15-23

I want to begin today with a story. Back in 1893 there was a huge World's Fair held in Chicago to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' voyage to the Americas. Nearly 21 million people visited the Fair during the six months it was open. There were a number of firsts at the Chicago World's Fair. The Fair showed off the first ferris wheel ever, invented by a guy named Ferris from Pittsburgh. It was the first large space lit up by electricity. The Chicago's World's Fair was the place where Pabst won it's Blue Ribbon, for being the world's best beer. It was also where Juicy Fruit Gum was first introduced.

One of the features of the World's Fair was something called "The World Parliament of Religion." It brought together Hindus and Sikhs, Buddhists and Muslims, Jews and Christians in a spirit of mutual tolerance and affirmation. Well, some of the pastors in the city of Chicago tried to organize a protest against the World Parliament of Religion. They sought out D.L. Moody who was the Billy Graham of his day and the most famous preacher in America. He was based in Chicago and they wanted Moody to go on the attack against this World Parliament of Religion because it was, in their opinion, promoting heathen religion.

But Moody refused to attack. Instead, he rented theaters all over the city of Chicago and set up preaching posts with local preachers and evangelists. He said “My aim is to make Jesus Christ so attractive that people will turn to Him.” It turned out to be Moody’s most successful evangelistic campaign. Thousands of fair-goers came to Jesus at these local theaters.

A couple of weeks ago, we started a series from the New Testament book of Colossians. Like other cities in the 1st century, there were numerous gods and goddesses worshipped at Colossae. Archeologists tell us from statues and coins dug up in that city that there were lots of deities worshipped there – the Greek goddess Isis, Artemis of the Ephesians, Zeus and Helios the sun god. They also found evidence of various magical practices and astrological beliefs and Colossae also housed a large Jewish population.

What was Paul’s method in doing church the midst of so much religious pluralism? Did he go on the attack and denounce all of these other religions? Did he spend time engaged in exotic spiritual warfare, shouting at spirits in heavenly places? Absolutely not! Like D.L. Moody nearly 1,900 years later, Paul decided that he was going to make Jesus so attractive that people would be drawn to Him regardless of all of the religions and spiritualities that were offered in the marketplace.

So here we are today in central Ohio. We are like the Colossae of the 1st century or the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in the 1890's. Our city is home to tens of thousands of Muslims from all across the globe. We have over a dozen Hindu temples, at least ten Buddhist temples, numerous synagogues, and about a thousand Christian churches of every stripe. We have practitioners of Wicca, and growing numbers of agnostics and atheists. What should those of us who are followers of Jesus do regarding the religious pluralism in our city? Should we go on the attack, start a social media campaign, or take out billboards denouncing other faiths? Of course not! The model of the Apostle Paul and the model of the evangelist D.L. Moody was to present Jesus in such an attractive way, such a winsome way, such a compelling way that men and women, whatever their religious background, might reach out to Jesus and become one of His followers.

I want to share with you my outline at the beginning of this talk, so you'll know where I'm going. Paul tells us in the passage we'll be looking at that first of all, Jesus is attractive because He is sufficient for all things. Second, Jesus is attractive because He is supreme over all things. Third, Jesus is attractive because He is the sustainer of all things and finally, Jesus is attractive because He is the Savior of all who believe in Him. Let's pray!

Let's look at this text.

[SLIDE #1]

Jesus is Attractive Because He is Sufficient For All Things

[SLIDE #2] Colossians 1:15-20 NIV

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers 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. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

In verses 15-20, we see that the Apostle Paul mentions the word “all” or “every” eight times. He uses the word “all” over and over again because he’s saying Jesus is enough! Jesus is sufficient! These verses tell us that you don’t need to add anything to Jesus. He is enough! You don’t need to add angels to Jesus or saints to Jesus or religious rituals or pilgrimages or knocking on wood or throwing salt over your shoulder or special prayers or moral efforts. All we need is Jesus.

I want to share with you an excerpt from a wonderful book by C.S. Lewis *Screwtape Letters*. In *Screwtape Letters*, if you haven't read it, a senior devil is giving lessons in the art of temptation to a junior devil in how to tempt a Christian. The senior devil writes...

[SLIDE #3]

“My dear Wormwood [that’s the junior devil], the real trouble about the set your patient is living in is that it is merely Christian. They all have individual interests, of course, but the bond remains mere Christianity. What we want, if men become Christians, is to keep them in the state of mind I call, “Christianity And.” You know – Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Cyclical Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform.

If they must be Christians, let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute the faith itself for some fashion with a Christian coloring.”

Paul’s letter to the Colossians is Paul’s rejection of “Christianity And.” We could easily title the book of Colossians “Simply Jesus” or “Jesus Plus Nothing.”

The reason Jesus is sufficient, the reason He is ultimately all that we need whether we are single or married, divorced or widowed, a teenage or a senior center, rich or poor, black, white, Latino or Asian is because Jesus is supreme.

[SLIDE #4]

Jesus is Attractive Because He is Supreme Over All Things

If you were to break down this passage, it falls neatly into two sections. In verses 15-17, the Apostle Paul is celebrating Jesus as being supreme over creation. In verses 18-20, the Apostle Paul celebrates Jesus as supreme over the new creation.

Or, we might say that in verses 15-17, Jesus is supreme over the universe and in verses 18-20 Jesus is said to be supreme over the church.

[SLIDE #5]

Jesus is Supreme Over All

Jesus is supreme over the material world and Jesus is supreme over the spiritual world. Jesus is the Creator of the world and Jesus is the Redeemer of the world. The Apostle Paul in other

words, rejects the division that we often make in our Christian faith between the sacred and the secular – the religious and the non-religious.

Let me bring this down. People say, “you know, I think about Jesus, I really do when it comes to the religious realm. I think about Jesus when I come to church, when I pray, when I go to a small group Bible study. But at work- no. Work’s the real world! Work, you know, is dog eat dog! Of course I don’t bring my faith into the workplace. Sunday I set aside for Jesus, but Monday through Saturday is for me. Jesus is supreme when it comes to my individual morality, who I sleep with, whether I’m going to steal or not, but Jesus is not supreme when it comes to public morality, how the people I vote for relate to immigrants or racial minorities or the unborn and their mothers.

Remember the repeated word in this text is “all.” Paul says it eight times – all, all, all. Jesus is supreme over all. There is an old saying that goes like this.

[SLIDE #6]

Either Christ is Lord of All or He is Not Lord of All

To make Jesus attractive, His will, His opinions, His plans must be supreme over ALL.

Jesus is supreme:

[SLIDE #7]

- Over who we date
- Over who we marry
- Over whether we divorce
- Over how we spend our money
- Over what kind of car we drive
- Over how we treat our bodies
- Over how we treat our mothers and fathers
- Over how we speak about others
- Over how much we give
- Over the way we engage at school and at our work
- Over what we look at online

Paul tells us to repeat the word “ALL” to ourselves. That’s what it means to be a Christian. A person becomes a Christian when the penny finally drops and they say “oh, to follow Jesus means He is the Lord of all of my life and all of my career decisions and all of my relationships and all of my ambitions and all of my money.

Let's look at the individual verses.

[SLIDE #8]

Jesus is Supreme Because He is The Image of the Invisible God

In Colossians 1:15, the Apostle Paul says Jesus is supreme as the image of God.

[SLIDE #9] Colossians 1:15 NIV

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

In the Apostle Paul's day, the image of the Roman emperor was everywhere in the society. You saw the Roman emperor's image in the marketplace, on statues, on coins, hanging in gymnasiums, on jewelry, on goblets, on lamps, in paintings. Caesar the Roman emperor was lord of all. That's what he was called, "lord." Caesar was called the son of god. Caesar was the one who brought the gift of peace to the world. Everywhere you went in Colossian society, you would be reminded of the presence of the Roman Empire through images. Today we are confronted with a new empire, the empire of global capitalism and consumerism. How many ads and images do you think you're exposed to in a day?

[SLIDE #10] Images of Products: Nike, Apple, Twitter, Amazon, McDonalds

I just read a paper by a marketing expert. He ran a crazy experiment to find out how many ads we see in the course of a day. He decided to try to count as many ads as he saw over the course of 24 hours. Long story short, he counted 487 ad messages before he finished eating breakfast. Then he gave up! Marketing professionals tell us that the average American is exposed to between 5-10,000 marketing messages and images every single day.

So how do you cleanse your imagination of images? How did the Apostle Paul challenge the Colossians to cleanse their imaginations of the images of the Roman emperor that were everywhere? How do we cleanse our minds of all of these corporate images, and marketing images, and violent images, and pornographic images that we're constantly exposed to? Paul says fill your imagination with Jesus! He is the image of the invisible God. Let His image dominate your mind and heart.

Paul doesn't attack the other images. Paul says instead, concentrate your thoughts on a greater image. Let His image dominate your mind and heart. No image of success can make you more successful than Jesus can. No image of some product that promises satisfaction can make you more satisfied than Jesus can. No image that promises fulfillment or peace or security or happiness can ever give you more fulfillment or peace or security or happiness than Jesus can –

because He is the image of God! If you want to know what God is like, focus your thoughts on Jesus!

Let's continue with the next phrase. In verse 15 we read...

[SLIDE #11] Colossians 1:15 NIV

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

[SLIDE #12]

Jesus is Supreme because He is The Firstborn of Creation

Now this little phrase “the firstborn of creation” is a favorite of Jehovah Witnesses! Jehovah Witnesses deny that Jesus is fully God and they say that Jesus had a beginning; that He’s the highest of created beings. So they go to this little phrase in Colossians 1:15 and they say “look here, Paul tells us that Jesus is the firstborn. Clearly that means that Jesus is the first of all created beings.”

Now that’s superficially convincing if you wrench the phrase “firstborn over all creation” entirely out of context. Listen to me friends. Every Christian cult that has ever been, every

Christian heresy that has ever been, and every bad Bible teacher, pulls Bible phrases out of context to make the Bible say what it never was intended to say.

[SLIDE #13]

A Text Without a Context is a Pretext

The context of this phrase, “the firstborn of creation,” is Paul’s celebration of Christ as supreme! If the Jehovah Witness interpretation of “firstborn” is right, that He’s the firstborn of God’s creatures – then Paul would be contradicting himself right after calling Christ the image of the invisible God. Then in the next phrase, look at verse 16.

[SLIDE #14] Colossians 1:16 NIV

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.

Paul is saying to us in verse 16 that far from being a creature, this wonderfully attractive Jesus about whom this passage is written, is the Creator! What does the firstborn mean if it doesn’t mean the first of God’s creatures?

We have to look at the way the Bible uses the term “firstborn.” We don’t read into the Bible our interpretations of Bible words. We read out of the Bible the way the Bible uses those words. The way the Bible uses the term “firstborn” is to communicate that the firstborn is not necessarily the one who is first in the birth order, the way we would use it today. “Firstborn” is what traditional societies would call the Number 1 son. First in rank, first in favor, first in inheritance. So Jacob in the Old Testament became the Number 1 son, first in rank, first in inheritance, first in favor, even though he wasn’t the first in birth order. This is what Paul was saying here when he calls Jesus the firstborn of or over all creation. He’s not saying anything about birth order. He’s saying Jesus is the Number 1 son. He’s the heir of God the Father. He is first in rank, first in honor, first in favor, Jesus is the one for whom the whole universe was made. He is the supreme God. He is the Creator.

So, let me ask you a question – is Jesus first in rank in your heart? Many scholars believe that Colossians 1:15-20 is a worship song designed to ignite our hearts with love for Jesus. Colossians 1:15-20 is designed to present Jesus as supremely attractive so that we would be drawn to Him. There’s an old hymn that goes this way...

[SLIDE #15]

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art
Thou my best thought, by day or by night

Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise

Thou mine inheritance, now and always

Thou and Thou only first in my heart

High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art

If you were to sing those words or say those words, would they be real for you? Can you say

“yes, I really mean that, Jesus and Jesus only, is first in my heart? First in my affections. Jesus is my best thought by day or by night!”

Let's continue with this text.

[SLIDE #16]

Jesus is Attractive because He is the Sustainer of All Things

Let's read Colossians 1:17 together.

[SLIDE #17] Colossians 1:17 NIV

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

I just want to make a simple point here before we finish up. Jesus is not only attractive because He's sufficient, He's enough. And He's not only attractive because He is supreme, He is Lord of all. But He is attractive because He is the sustainer of everything! Jesus didn't just wind up the universe and release it to run on its own. He's not an absentee landlord or some slum-lord who lives in another city and never, ever fixes anything, someone you can never reach who simply collects the rent but doesn't provide any services. Jesus is actively, right now, involved in sustaining the universe, in holding it up, in holding it together.

These days, you know with any gadget that you get, if it breaks you basically throw it away. It's so expensive to fix a cellphone and it takes so much time. We just toss it and get another expensive cellphone. There's no way to fix broken earbuds, and who would do that work anyway? But in contrast, the Apostle Paul is saying that Jesus is not like that! Jesus services what He sells! He doesn't just make things as Creator, He sustains what He makes. Jesus is not an absentee landlord. He fixes what's broken and He holds everything together.

You know, I can't imagine getting married if the two people getting don't have Jesus at the center of their lives. There are so many centrifugal forces pulling couples apart. When a young couple stands in front of a church and they exchange vows with each other, I think to myself, what is it that is going to keep this couple together for the next 50 years, through all of the hard times that we human beings face? If you're dating someone right now and you're thinking about marriage, you need to ask yourself a very personal question "What will keep our

marriage going, not just in good times but at all times?” If one of us gets really sick, if we have a miscarriage, if we go through the death of a parent or a friend, if we have financial problems, if we have a child who is an addict, if we have job problems, if we’re laid off, how do we know if our marriage will survive? If we’re not as attractive as we used to be? If we get old? If we go bald? If we change? What energy source can a couple tap into that will keep their love alive for a lifetime? Only Jesus! He holds all things together, even marriages.

Last point, Jesus is attractive not only because He is sufficient for all things and not only because He is supreme over all things and not only because He is sustainer of all things, but because He is the Savior of all who turn to Him.

[SLIDE #18]

Jesus is Attractive because He is the Savior of All Who Turn to Him

In verses 21 and 22 the Apostle Paul says this...

[SLIDE #19] Colossians 1:21-22 NIV

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

Let me close with this. Would any of you say, "the truth is that there are some things about myself that I need to change. There are some things about myself that I need to get right." Do you know that the Bible is infinitely more optimistic about the possibility of us changing than any philosophy or therapy that you will ever encounter?

In verse 22 we read the two most hopeful words we could ever hear.

[SLIDE #20] Colossians 1:22 NIV

But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

I want to encourage you to underline in your Bible the words, "but now." Paul loves in his writings to do a before and after. Before you were far from God. But now you are near to God. Before you were an enemy of God. But now you are His friend. Before your mind was

dominated by a whole bunch of other things, but now Jesus has captured your heart. Paul uses the word “but now” everywhere in his writings.

[SLIDE #21] Romans 6:22 NIV

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.

[SLIDE #22] Ephesians 2:13 NIV

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

We were outside the circle, but now we’re inside. We were at war with God, but now we’re at peace. I can’t think of two more hopeful words in the whole world than “but now.” You know the famous hymn “Amazing Grace?” It goes this way,

[SLIDE #23]

Amazing Grace how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me

I once was lost but now I'm found

Was blind but now I see

So let me ask you...have you ever had a "but now" in your life? That's what it means to be a Christian. That's what it means to be a follower of Jesus. You've had a turning point! You've had a change! You used to be on one side of the line with God, but now you've crossed the line. You never gave a passing thought to God, but now Jesus dominates your thoughts. You used to call the shots in your life, but now you find yourself regularly asking Jesus what does He want for you? What is His will? You used to think only about yourself, your needs, your feelings, how people were treating you, but now because you've turned to Jesus you find yourself regularly thinking about others. How you could encourage others. How you could do something kind for others. Friend, have you had a "but now" in your life? Has there been a change, a turning, a clear embrace of Jesus? Has Jesus become your best thought by day and by night? Has Jesus become really attractive to you? Let's pray!

Making Jesus Attractive

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- I. Jesus is Attractive Because He is Sufficient For All Things
- II. Jesus is Attractive Because He is Supreme Over All Things
 - a. Jesus is Supreme Over All
 - b. Jesus is Supreme Because He is The Image of the Invisible God
 - c. Jesus is Supreme Because He is The Firstborn of All Creation
- III. Jesus is Attractive Because He is The Sustainer of All Things
- IV. Jesus is Attractive Because He is The Savior of All Who Turn to Him