



COLOSSIANS SERIES: THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

HE HAS THE SUPREMACY IN EVERYTHING

Colossians 1:15-20

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Introduction: Indiscriminate Friendliness in Colossae

As many of you know, my wife Katie and I are in the process of adopting two children from Ethiopia, Lord willing. It should happen any day now. We're just waiting on pins and needles, as you can imagine, for a phone call to head off to Addis Ababa to pick up a sibling pair two years and younger. That will give us five children under the age of eight. It should be exciting in our house, Lord willing. But through the process of adopting, we've learned a new, interesting phrase—"indiscriminate friendliness." It's a phrase that folks who work with adoptive parents and adoptive children use to describe the challenge that sometimes institutionalized orphans have in making the transition from an orphanage into an adoptive home.

"Indiscriminate friendliness." That is the inability of the child, the challenge of the child, in being able to discriminate between his primary caregivers and strangers—the difficulty in being able to discriminate in a crowd of people who is the adoptive mother or father and who is just a stranger off the street. You can see signs of indiscriminate friendliness when you see small adoptive children who attach themselves to a stranger just as easily as to their own parents. So the idea is that if we bring our children into the Portico on a Sunday morning, they may just as easily attach themselves to your leg as they would to my leg. They can attach themselves with strangers and go home with them just as easily as they might with me. This is indiscriminate friendliness, an inability to discriminate between strangers and a primary caregiver.

Well, as Christians we have that same challenge, don't we? The challenge of being indiscriminately friendly, the difficulty in discriminating between our primary caregiver, Jesus Christ, and strangers, that is, strange people or strange practices or strange patterns of thinking in the world. We show an indiscriminate friendliness often. Normal children, so to speak, will have separation anxiety if they're pulled away from their parents between the age of six and nine months. They will display such a separation anxiety. Well, oftentimes institutionalized children who are adopted into another family don't display that same sort of separation anxiety. They have this indiscriminate friendliness. And as Christians we can often be like that. We can attach ourselves to the things of the world and not think much about it. We can just as easily wander off with a stranger in the world, so to speak, as we would attach ourselves to Jesus Christ. There is this kind of indiscriminate friendliness that I think we wrestle with as Christians.

Indiscriminate Friendliness in Colossae

The Colossians to whom Paul was writing this letter struggled with indiscriminate friendliness as well. Some who came into the church at Colossae were advocating what Paul calls human traditions or false teachings, traditions based on the principles of man, the principles of the world. And Paul sees in the Colossians signs of indiscriminate friendliness, of attaching themselves not to their primary caregiver but to the strangers who have made their way into the church and are teaching these false teachings.

So what is Paul's response? It's the same response that we learned in our adoption classes. What do you do when you see in your adopted child signs of indiscriminate friendliness? What they teach you is that you are to go over to your child and gently and yet firmly reassert yourself in the life of that child as the primary caregiver. So again, we come into the portico, and I set my adoptive two-year-old down on the ground, and he or she just sort of runs off and latches onto your leg and wants to just walk off with you and go home from church with you and leave Dad in the dust. What am I supposed to do in that sort of situation? I'm supposed to go over to the child, scoop the child up, bring him or her to my chest, and reaffirm myself as that child's primary caregiver. "Here's Dad. What do you need, sweetheart? I can provide it for you. I am here to help you. I'm your primary caregiver." That's how you deal with indiscriminate friendliness in adoptive children.

First Stanza: Jesus Christ as the Firstborn of All Creation (vv. 15-17)

How do you deal with indiscriminate friendliness in adopted Christians—Christians who have been adopted from the dominion of this world and brought into the kingdom of the Son whom God loves? Well, that's what Paul does with this passage this morning before us, a magnificent passage, Colossians 1:15-20. He asserts in their presence and before their eyes Jesus Christ in all of his supremacy and grandeur and glory and magnificence, as a way to draw their attention and their gaze away from the strangers to whom they might be led astray to attach themselves with, and back to Jesus Christ as their primary caregiver. That's what Paul is doing in this passage as he sings this magnificent song.

Scholars often talk about this passage being a kind of song, a kind of hymn that they refer to as "the Christ hymn" because of the structure of it. It has two stanzas, first stanza in verses 15-17, the second stanza in verses 18-20. And the point of what Paul is doing here is reasserting Jesus Christ in the eyes and before the minds of the Colossians to try to draw their attention and affection back to their primary caregiver. And what does he say about Jesus Christ so as to draw their attention back to Jesus? He asserts that Jesus, first of all, has supremacy in creation. That's the first stanza, verses 15-17. And the second thing he says is that Jesus Christ has supremacy in the new creation as well.

So he has supremacy over all things, supremacy in creation and supremacy over the new creation. Paul is celebrating this magnificent Christ in order to draw the Colossians back to Jesus. And that's the purpose of the passage in our lives and in this church this morning—to draw our attention back to Jesus Christ, to see the supremacy of Christ in everything, so as to help us with our indiscriminate friendliness.

So in the first stanza Paul is affirming that Jesus Christ has supremacy in creation! You see him asserted thus in verse 15. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." "The firstborn of all creation." There has been a lot of mischief about that little word—*firstborn* of all creation. Perhaps you have been introduced to the teaching of the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, and they'll talk about Jesus being the first of all God's created things, all creatures, the firstborn of all creation. But what Paul's getting at here in this passage is not that Jesus is the first of all created things. He is the firstborn, that is, he is the King, the one who exercises supremacy over the created things. "Firstborn" is a biblical way of talking about kingship. So, for example, in Psalm 89, you'll see David described as God's firstborn. And that's what Paul's doing here in celebrating Jesus as the firstborn of all creation. He is not saying that he's the first of the things that God created. He's saying that Jesus is the king over all creation.

And that makes sense of the phrase that comes just before it. Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God." He is the king who reflects the kingship of God the Father, and that is now

reflected in the kingship of God the Son. And in verse 13 you'll see that we were "rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom" of the King, the kingdom of the Son, the kingdom of God's firstborn. So here Paul is asserting that Jesus has supremacy. He is king over all creation. And then he supports that assertion with three things in verses 16 and 17. Strap your seatbelts on for this part. What he says about Jesus here is stunning. First of all in order to support the supremacy of Jesus in creation, he says that Jesus created everything. Verse 16 says, "For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. All things were created by him and for him." Everything that you see and everything that you can't see, everything that's on earth, everything that's in heaven—Jesus Christ created all of them. Every molecule in the universe, every molecule in your body—Jesus Christ created every single one of them. He created all things, everything that you can see and everything you can't see, he created all of them.

But more than that, verse 17 says that not only did he create all things, he precedes all things. "He is before all things." One of the great little vignettes in the Gospels is where Jesus is interacting with the Pharisees, the religious teachers of the day, and the topic of Abraham comes up. Jesus says to these Jewish Pharisees about Abraham, "Abraham longed to see my day, he did see it, and he rejoiced and was glad to see it." First the Pharisees looked at him and said, "Huh?" and there is this great little line in John's Gospel, chapter 8, where the Pharisees say, "But you're not even fifty years old yet, and you say that you saw Abraham and Abraham saw you?" Do you remember Jesus' response? "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." "I am"! Before the solar system was, Jesus Christ says, "I am"! Before the galaxy came into existence, the Lord Jesus Christ says, "I am." Before the universe was flung into existence, however it was flung into existence, Jesus Christ says from all eternity past, "I am." He precedes all things! He created all things!

And the third thing Paul affirms in this passage, after saying he created all things and he precedes all things, is that he sustains all things, verse 17, the second part of it. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Not only did Jesus create all things, but he goes on creating. That is, he goes on sustaining everything we see and everything we don't see—every molecule, every particle. The writer of the Hebrews in 1:3 says Jesus Christ is the one who upholds the whole universe "by the word of his power." He is the glue, he is the sustaining force for everything we see, we feel, we touch. Everything in the universe he's sustaining in its existence. And so as an encouragement, place two fingers on your neck. I hope all of you feel a pulse. Who's sustaining that heartbeat, beat by beat by beat? Jesus Christ! He's not only the one who created the heartbeat, he's not only the one who preceded you and me by a mile, he's the one who sustains every pulse of your heart! Every synapse firing in your brain he is sustaining. He is sustaining everything you see and hear. He is sustaining my voice as it's traveling—the sound particles coming from me to your ears—sustaining it all, his hands undergirding everything we see.

Someone shared before the service that they were in a car accident recently. Now this is where the rubber meets the road—this vision of Jesus and the challenging realities of our lives. Who sustains all of those things? Who holds all of these things and sovereignly orchestrates them together? Jesus Christ. He has supremacy over the creation. That's Paul's point here in affirming that Jesus precedes all things, created all things, and sustains all things. And so you step back in light of this picture—who Jesus is—and it's really astonishing, isn't it, that Jesus gets so little attention in the world. Recently *Time* magazine announced the hundred most influential people in 2008. Scanning through that issue, it had Steve Jobs of Apple, the Dalai Lama, Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom, and of course President-elect Obama, and I kept

scrolling to see if Jesus Christ made the top hundred. And he didn't! He didn't! Astonishing, isn't it? The one who created all things! I mean, Steve Jobs is a creative character, but he didn't create all things. And the Dalai Lama and the other religious leaders whom they profile no doubt have a lot of wisdom. They have been around for a while and can teach us a few things, I'm sure. But they didn't precede all things, they didn't say to the universe, "I am before you even came into existence." Did the Dalai Lama say that? And Barack Obama, when he goes into office as president, is going to wield an awful lot of power. He's going to turn a lot of wheels as the president of the United States, the president of the most powerful country in the world. But he doesn't sustain all things. He doesn't sustain your heartbeat or my heartbeat. Jesus Christ does!

So do you see what Paul is doing here? Paul is holding up this supremacy of Jesus over everything, as if to say, don't pin messianic hopes and aspirations on any president-elect or on any neat forthcoming piece of technology. None of those are your primary caregiver. Jesus Christ alone is your primary caregiver. He created, precedes, and sustains all things. And so, regardless of the circumstances of your life, he has the power and the ability and the wherewithal to orchestrate it for your eternal good if you will trust him with your life. Amen? Amen! Jesus Christ has the supremacy over creation. That's the first stanza of Paul's song, this hymn here.

Second Stanza: Jesus Christ as the Firstborn of the New Creation (vv. 18-20)

The second stanza says that Jesus Christ has the supremacy over the new creation as well. This is a movement theologically in the letter. Not only in creation does Jesus have supremacy, he has supremacy in the new creation. Paul asserts this in verse 18, "and [Jesus] is the head of the body, the church." The church is the advance guard of the new creation reality that is coming into the whole world. The church is anticipating that he is the head of that, that is, he is the source. He is the source of the church's life. Yes, as the head of the church he is the authority. He's the one who rules the church. But Paul's point here is that he is the source of the church's life.

If you look at 2:16-19, you'll see that Paul is talking about people getting carried away in false teaching. And what happens to you, if you get carried away with indiscriminate friendliness and drift off into goofiness as a Christian, what will happen is, you will loose connection (verse 19) with the head, Jesus Christ. From him, the whole body supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews grows as God causes it to grow. So don't lose connection with Jesus. He is the source of the church's life. He is also, Paul says, "the beginning" (1:18). See that little phrase? He is "the beginning." The beginning of what? He is the beginning of God's new creation! Now what does that mean? Well, he interprets it with the next phrase. He's "the beginning"; that is, you might say, "he is the firstborn from among the dead." Who is the first person to experience a new creation resurrection body? Answer: Jesus Christ with the power of God and the power of God's Holy Spirit. So our resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, who is now seated in glory in his transformed resurrected body, is the beginning—the beginning of the new creation, the beginning where this whole old messed-up, fallen world is headed. He's the beginning.

And so we as Christians look to Jesus Christ in his resurrected body and say, "That's where we're headed. By faith, I'm going to persevere. That's where I'm headed." He's the beginning of something new. The old world is fallen and messed up, and it's messed up because Jesus did everything, created everything, sustains everything and gets no kudos, gets no attention in the world. So what's God going to do about that situation? He's going to create

something new—a new creation, a new creation where that happens. Do you see the logic? He is “the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead.” Why? Why send a son to die, with all the bloodshed, and then raise him up from the dead? Why would God do that? Because he is doing something new in the world. He’s doing something new, he’s creating something new where Jesus Christ will at last, as he ought, have supremacy in everything. That’s where we’re headed. And won’t it be sweet to be in a world where Jesus is on the front page of *Time* magazine every issue. Every issue! There’s no sort of, “Well, did he edge out the Dalai Lama this year?” There’s no “Whoa, we’re all impressed with President-elect Obama, as impressive a character as he is.” He is nothing compared to Jesus.

So no indiscriminate friendliness with the American political system as Christians, okay? Seriously. We honor, we pray for our leaders, we participate as good citizens, we render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, but we give Jesus Christ what’s Jesus Christ’s, which is everything. Okay? So he is “the beginning,” he is “the firstborn from among the dead,” he has supremacy in the new creation. And where do we see the new creation dawning? We see it with Jesus as a resurrected person. That’s where we’re going, that’s what the new creation is going to look like. We also see it in the church. How? By the Spirit of God transforming the people of God into a new creation community, and transforming our lives into new creation lives. This is why it is so crucial how you live. Put off the old man, and put on the new man—that’s where Paul’s going in chapter 3. What’s he saying there? Live out the new creation with your life. And what is new creation reality? It’s the fruit of the Spirit. That’s a horticultural image, isn’t it? God is planting a new garden in the church, like the garden of Eden—a new creation reality where he is restoring the image of God in the life of the church and in your individual lives. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control—those are the realities of the new heavens and the new earth where, as 2 Peter says, “righteousness dwells.”

And so we are to embody that and live that out now. So Jesus has supremacy in the new creation. He ‘s the head of the church, and Paul supports that with two assertions or two supporting comments in verses 19 and 20. Jesus has supremacy in the new creation, supremacy in the life of the church, for two reasons. First of all because in Jesus is God’s presence. That’s what verse 19 says, “for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.” Think of that almost humorous exchange between Jesus and Philip, his disciple, when Philip says to him, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” Do you remember what Jesus says? It was a rebuke. “Philip, have I been with you so long and you still don’t get it?” as if to say that to all of the disciples. “You still don’t get it after I have been with you so long. I and the Father are one. To see me,” Jesus says, “is to see the Father.” Why? Because God has chosen to have all of his presence dwell bodily in Jesus Christ. And so, friends, we uphold the exclusivity of Jesus Christ vis-à-vis all the other religions of the world, not because we are sectarian, not because we are fundamentalist, not because we’re prissy or grumpy or not educated or have not read about Islam or Hinduism or have not been enlightened. We uphold the exclusivity of Jesus Christ for a very important theological reason. It’s because God has chosen to have all of his fullness dwell there, not elsewhere. So we say, go to Jesus. Do you want to know about God? You have to go to Jesus. Do you want to see God? Go to Jesus. He has supremacy in the new creation because God’s presence dwells fully there. He is the locus of God’s presence in the world. That’s the first support.

The second support is that not only do we in Jesus encounter the *presence* of God but in Jesus we experience the *peace* of God. That’s what verse 20 is saying. And through Jesus God “has reconciled to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.” How? By making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” Do you see the two words in that verse—*reconciliation* and *peace*? Those are two great political aspirations of our time—reconciliation

and peace! Think of what is going on right now in the Middle East in Israel. Longing for reconciliation and longing for peace. Or if you think of this recent election cycle and the near messianic aspirations that were expressed by so many in our country for a change of things, for a change in the regime, in the administration, a longing for a day where there will be greater reconciliation and hopefully greater peace. Reconciliation and peace—these are the political aspirations of our time and of every time.

Conclusion

Friends, here is the deal. Jesus Christ has already established the reconciliation and the peace we all long for. Jesus Christ has already established reconciliation and peace for each one of us, and everyone who has ever been created. And how did he do it? Did he do it through really ingenious political negotiations? Did he do it by joining the United Nations? Did he do it by political might and spreading *pax Americana* far and wide? Did he do it by turning the levers on the American military machine? How did he do it? How did he establish this reconciliation and this peace of which everything else we see around us in political systems is just a shadow and a groping and a longing and a parody? He did it by death. That's how he did it. He did it by dying, by shedding his blood on the cross. So you see here that Paul is singing this fantastic song, the song that Jesus has supremacy in creation. There is nothing in your circumstance over which Jesus doesn't have supremacy and that you shouldn't seek his supremacy in, whether it's your finances or your family or your health. And Jesus also has supremacy in the life of the new creation. And the church is the advance guard of that. So we should always be seeking the presence of God and the peace of God in the person of Jesus Christ as a body and as a church.

Katie and I are looking forward to getting one or two children from Ethiopia, hopefully before two long. And we feel like we are better equipped with dealing with this issue of indiscriminate friendliness should we see signs of it in the child or children whom we then adopt into our family. We will scoop them up and gently yet firmly reassert ourselves in their life as their primary caregiver, saying, "I can provide for you, I can meet your need, trust in me, don't walk off with a stranger." That's what the passage is doing for you. That is what Jesus Christ wants to do for you wherever you are this morning. Reassert himself, or perhaps for the first time assert himself in your heart and in your life as the one who can meet all your needs, who can enable you to encounter the presence of God and enjoy the peace of God.

And the application this morning for this sermon is going to happen when we go to the Lord's Table together. The application is for us as a body to come to the Table where we see the presence of God and the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and we encounter the peace of God and his dying for our sins. So I'm going to lead us in a word of prayer right now. I'm going to give us an opportunity to do business with the Lord, quietly confess our sins before him, and ask for his grace and forgiveness as we draw near to the Table.

So, Father, that is what we do as we think about the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all things and in all things. We think about his beauty, we think about his excellency and his majesty, and we recognize how each one of us falls short of what you have for us. So in the quietness of our own heart right now we want to confess our sins before you.

Father, we are thankful that you hear us, and we pray that you would enable us to repent of where we have fallen short even this week, to cast our burdens, our cares, our shortcomings upon your cross, there to find your reconciliation and the peace that we need for not only our guilty conscience but for our broken life. We pray this thanking you in the name of Christ. Amen.