

## *“Christ’s Exaltation Over Mankind”*

In 1873 the great city of Chicago had a horrific fire. But, from the ashes that city arose and became bigger despite of that tragedy. Only 20 years after that fire in 1893 the city was ready to show off to the whole world. It hosted the World’s Columbian Exposition. Some 21 million visited the various exhibits which was mind-boggling for that day.

One of the features of the Exposition was “The World Parliament of Religions.” Numerous representatives of the world’s religions met to dialogue about the supposed strong points of their respective religions. The hope by many was that this would result in forming a new world religion. Evangelist D.L Moody heard of this and thought it to be the perfect evangelism opportunity. So, he assigned and dispatched various evangelists to different posts to preach from throughout Chicago. Church buildings were used. Theaters were rented. In fact, Moody himself rented a large circus tent so that the Word of God could be preached.

But, what was Moody to say? Many of his friends urged him to go on the attack – to decry “The Parliament of Religions.” But he did not do it on that occasion. In fact, he refused to do so. Why? Well, Moody reasoned, “I am [just] going to make Jesus Christ so attractive that [people] will turn to him.” And they did. Many thousands professed Christ. This “Chicago Campaign” of 1893 is still considered to be perhaps the major highlight of Moody’s ministry.

Moody had the right notion: simply preaching Christ in all His preeminence, supremacy and all-sufficiency is what draws men unto Him. There is a time to speak against wrong theology and practice. Moody certainly did that. But, most of all we are to lift Christ up (make known who He is). Just simple, positive declaration of His peerless identity is the best corrective to wrong teaching (taken from Warren Wiersbe, *Be Complete* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1981], 52-53).

Moody’s strategy was not original with him. It’s a strategy that goes all the way back to the first century and the Apostle Paul. Paul had his own “World Parliament of Religions” of sorts to deal with. It was the heresy of pre-Gnosticism. And like the “World Parliament of Religions” Gnostics viewed Jesus as a good man among other good creatures. They taught that Christ was only one of thousands of emanations coming from God. He is a good place to start to get to God, but not God Himself and the only exclusive person to get to God. Paul and the early church objected and basically argued if Jesus is not Lord over all then He is not Lord at all.

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Please turn to our text this evening: Colossians 1:15.

Last week with Col 1:14 we hit a transitional point in the epistle to the Colossians. We moved from the letter’s personal section to it’s doctrinal Section. From this point through chapter two we’ll learn of the doctrine of Christ’s supremacy and His sufficiency. Tonight, we are entering into a section with some thick theology, specifically Christology. It is doctrinally potent. Again, the reason for this doctrinal potency was to deal with a prevalent heresy.

Let’s read Col 1:15-20 although we’ll limit our consideration tonight to just verse 15.

*“<sup>15</sup> Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: <sup>16</sup> For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. <sup>19</sup> For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; <sup>20</sup> And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.”*

An unfolding of the person and work of Christ by Paul is his method for defending the pure Gospel against the Judaistic, proto-Gnostic heresy. That’s a mouth full and sounds like a mixed bag of non-sense. That’s because it was a mixed bag of non-sense.

One of the heretical elements was the exaltation of angels as mediators between God and man. What this did was minimize Christ. They didn't consider Him as the only mediator between God and man. Thus His full deity and humanity were denied. They thought of Jesus Christ as a powerful and intelligent creature. But only one among many spirits that bridged the gap between God and man. Just one in a long string of mediators strung out between the holy transcendent God and the morally corrupt material world. Remember another element the heretics taught was dualism (all matter is bad, and all things spiritual are good). This resulted in distorted teaching on Christ's bodily life, bodily death and bodily resurrection. You see, the Gnostics believed that Christ did not have a real body. They argued that if He had a real body that would have put him in contact with the material world and thus been corrupted. So, their solution was to have a Jesus that didn't have a real body. But, this belief resulted in them living wrongly in one of two extremes. One extreme said, "Since our bodies are bad we must enslave them – practice asceticism." The other extreme said, "Since our bodies are bad and we can't stop them from doing bad, let's enjoy sinning in our bodies." Their wrong doctrine led to wrong practice.

Now, some of the heretics would have thought of Jesus as the most powerful and intelligent creature. But, in their mind He was still only a creature and not the Creator. They'd contend that He's very much like God, but not God. Instead, He is only a spirit being emanating from God. The idea of God Himself becoming a man and thus exposing himself to a corrupt material world was absurd to them. In fact, the Gnostics held that God did not directly create the universe for this reason. They basically taught that God couldn't create the universe directly. Instead, He had created the universe indirectly through a long series of emanations that came out from God. And each one of these new emanation was a step further away from God than the one before. So they'd argue by the point evil matter was actually created in the universe it was so far from God that it didn't touch God. Instead, the evil of matter only touched the various emanations. Indeed this is some weird teaching, isn't it?

The heretics also emphasized a secret, mystical knowledge (*gnosis*) as necessary for salvation. This secret knowledge required worshipping angels and keeping Jewish ceremonial laws. Basically their various legalisms minimized Christ's substitutionary atonement. In their minds His substitution was not sufficient. They had to add to it with their good works.

So, Paul in his epistle will address all these and other elements of the heresy. He will make sure the Colossian Christians know that Jesus Christ is one in essence with the Eternal Father while simultaneously a distinct person within the Trinity. He wanted them to know that Jesus Christ is Creator who directly created the universe. And, that He had direct contact with His creation. In fact, He physically dwelt among man in His incarnation but without being tainted by sin. The proof of that is His physical, bodily resurrection in which He conquered sin and its result of death.

Paul wants the Colossians and us today to realize that Jesus is the supreme sovereign, redeemer and creator. He wants us to make sure we know that Jesus is God. And so, this most foundation issue (Christ's deity) is where Paul starts his defense. And we would do well today as we encounter cultists to start where Paul started, the deity of Jesus Christ.

I think it's noteworthy that Paul's solution to the developing problems in Colossae wasn't a new program. He didn't say we've got to come up with an original, fresh, novel idea to help the Colossians live and think as they should. Or, maybe we should shorten the sermons and water down the message while we're at it to attract new folks. No. Paul's church growth model (growing the Colossians spiritually which would result in Christians reaching out and growing the church numerically) was to give them a heavy dose of doctrine. He smothers them with some of the stoutest Christological teaching in Scripture.

If we're going to live lives that reflect Christ we have to know about the cosmic significance of Christ. Our thoughts must soar into the heavenlies and take hold of the lofty, enormous sized theological truths about Christ. So that once our minds have apprehended these truths we can cram them into the tiny spaces of our heart that we might live out our lives

in a big way for Christ. Because, if we only have small thoughts of Christ (we don't see Him as sufficient in our salvation and as the supreme sovereign) we will live little lives.

The attack on Christ's supremacy and therefore His sufficiency was the great danger of the proto-Gnostic heresy. These false teachers said a lot of things that would have sounded good. They said lots a nice things about Jesus. But they would also have told the Colossians: "You started well with Christ, but now you need to go deeper. You need to learn this secret knowledge, have these deeper experiences and do these certain rituals." In other words, they would have said, "Christ is a good place to start but He's not completely sufficient. You need to do and be more." If a person starts buying into this malarkey it is going to adversely affect his thinking about Christ and it will adversely affect his practice.

Now, before we dive into the exposition of verse 15 let me just mention one more thing about verses 15-20. New Testament scholars recognize this paragraph as an ancient hymn comprised of two stanzas and a connecting chorus. The first stanza is vv 15-16. The chorus is thought to be v 17. And, the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanza is vv 18-20.

More than likely this was an early Christian hymn that preceded Paul. It's a pre-Pauline "hymn." A hymn that the early church would have known quite well and would have sang often. A hymn that Paul under the Holy Spirit's inspiration inserted into this epistle. It makes sense that the Holy Spirit uses this hymn at this juncture as Paul launches into his doctrinal defense. This was one of the key functions for hymns back then. A helpful way to think of this hymn is that it is a confession of faith. That is how it is functioning. What better way to teach and remember right doctrine than to set it too some form of music? In fact, Paul will later in this epistle (Col 3:16) say, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Paul practiced what he preached. In our text, he is teaching through use of hymns. He and the early church put a high premium on the use hymns. And I think it is important that we remember this with the hymns we sing today. One of the objectives of our hymnody is for teaching. Hymns are important because they are wedded to the sermon. It's important that as much as possible the hymns support the sermon. Now, don't make an exact correspondence to our hymns today with our metrical verses and theirs. There are differences. But, the important thing we must know is that this hymn is basically "A confession of faith", an ancient "creed", a polemic against false teaching.

The Church has a rich history of using confessions like this as a necessary vehicle to preserve the Gospel. So, we have this creed and other passages (like Philp 2:5-11) that are creedal in nature that are imbedded into inspired Scripture. Why? To assert pure doctrine and defend against erroneous doctrine. This tradition of creedal formulation continued in the church after the canon of Scripture was closed. Why? Because new heresies popped up and there needed to be creeds written to defend against them. These creeds basically said, "We're going on the record. This is what we believe Scripture teaches."

There are a few traits we see in these verses that tip us off that we have a hymnic, confession of faith here. For one thing, the language is theologically elevated as it exalts the preeminence of Christ in creation and redemption.

Two, if you notice before the hymn in vv 12-14 there are several third person pronouns "we" & "us". The "we" & "us" refers to the Colossian believers and Paul. He is including himself. And indeed, all Christians by extension can be included. After the hymn in vv 21-23 you can see some 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns "you" or "your" sprinkled in. The "you" & "your" is referring to who? The Colossians specifically and again when we broaden out the applications it is also for all Christians. You say, "So what?" Here's why that matters: the focus is not on the Colossians or Paul or most broadly Christians in vv 15-20. Who is the focus on? It's on Christ. We are learning of Christ. We're learning doctrine and we're hearing the confession of the early church about Christ. The echo we hear is "This is what we believe about Jesus" and then in vv 15-20 we hear it. Do you see that? These verses are not about the Christian community in Colossians. But rather, the right doctrine that Christian community should embrace about Christ.

Three, (I'll spare you the technicalities) but scholars say that the style of these verses (the way the phrases correspond when read aloud) tip us off that this is an ancient hymn.

I said last time that our consideration of Christ's supremacy in this hymn wrap themselves around four relationships that the Son of God has. The way that Jesus uniquely relates to these four things or persons show His superiority/ His preeminence. Last week we saw His preeminence in how He relates to sin. "[It is in Him] in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins (v 14)" Tonight we'll look at His unique relationship to the Father (v 15). And in time, we'll look at His relationship to the creation (v 16-17) and His relationship to the Church (v 18). In these relationships we learn that Christ is exalted over sin, mankind, all creation, and the church.

So we press forward by thinking on this theme: **Christ is superior to mankind because of His unique relationship with God the Father.** Our text: **verse 15: "[Christ] is the image of the invisible God."** That short phrase is more than enough for us to chew on tonight.

## **I. God invisible is Supreme:**

If we're going to learn the implications about Christ being "the image of the invisible God" we first must understand "the invisible God" of which He is the "image." The literal rendering of "invisible God" in the Greek is "the God, the unseen one."

This is **the** Invisible God, not **a** visible god. That is a fundamental building block in Christian Theology. Of course, this finds its roots in the Old Testament which might not seem too earth shattering. But, monotheism and the idea that God is unseen and cannot be touched was an unparalleled paradigm shift in the ancient near east. Israel's theology was a radical counterbalance to surrounding pagan nations. The depraved imaginations of fallen men invented gods and crafted them with their hands. These gods were tangible. Made of stone and wood. They had eyes, ears, feet and other body parts.

It was idolatry. Idolatry. It is a major, perhaps the major, ultimate affront to the Invisible Creator God. Think about it. Man is created in the image of God. God is Creator Lord. But, in ultimate rebellion man declares through his actions that He is Lord and creates a god in his image. Paul commenting about the foolishness of fallen man in Romans 1:23 says, "[They've] changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four footed beasts, and creeping things." There is a certain insanity to idolatry. We who are believers in "the invisible God" I think have an especially difficult time with this. We think, "Come on people, really. You're going to chip away stone and make an idol out of it – your own creation and then bow down to worship it? Where's your brain. Are you insane?" It may seem insane to us sophisticated American Christians and it is. But, let's realize there are intelligent people, professionals, educated folks in our own country and around the world that bow down to idols or venerate animals. They succeed in some of your same vocations. Their idolatry is nutty. But to the unregenerate man, idolatry feels so natural and so right. This is one way sin twists fallen man's thinking. Our natural man wants a god we can see, handle and ultimately control through our good works or whatever. And by the way, even regenerate folks can struggle with reverting back to this insane mentality. It's just our gods, idols are more sophisticated. We wouldn't dream of worshipping a block of wood. No. Instead, we bow down to another person (a relationship in our lives), a dollar bill or homes and trucks/cars – as if those things will give us significance.

The natural man has a proclivity toward a tangible God. Problem: How then are people then going to come to know the One True God they cannot see? Keep that troubling question in mind and will answer it in a moment.

John 4:24 tells us that "God is spirit, and they that worship him must worship *Him* in Spirit and in truth." So, we know that the essence of the true and living God is spiritual, not material. John 1:18 says, "'No man hath seen God at any time.'" 1 Tim 6:16 says, "[God] alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see."

Man is finite. He is confined to being in only one place at one time. You are seated in one place right now and can only be in one time – the present. So it is impossible to see God who is infinite. That is to say He is everywhere at all points

of time (past, present, & future). In fact, He is not only at all points of time, but stands outside of time. He is eternal. Now, all that I just said can be summed up in our children's catechism question: "Does God have a body like ours?" Answer: "No. God is a Spirit, Infinite and Eternal."

So, I return to the problem question I proposed earlier: How are people going to come to know the One True God if they cannot see Him? The Answer is Jesus Christ.

## II. Christ is Supreme because He is the image of the invisible God:

In Christ "the invisible God, became visible." He is "the image of the invisible God." Today, when we hear the word image we think of something different than what Paul meant. Today, we think in terms of a copy. We think of something that actually isn't the reality to which it points. For example, a photograph is an image that captures a reality but it isn't the reality. Maybe you take a picture of a tree, but that picture is not the tree - just an image of it.

That's not the way the word "image" in Paul's day was used. "*Eikon*" is the Gk word for "image." We get our English word "icon" from it. The word "icon" originally implied appearance. But, you've got to understand in Greek thought that an image shares in the reality of what it represents (*Linguistic Key*, 567). The symbol brought into focus the actual presence of the object it represented, that's why J.B. Phillips translates our text as the "visible expression of God." Paul is explaining that Jesus reveals something which is invisible: God.

In OT times men saw theophanies – that is God appeared in visible form in order to communicate to them. And in order to communicate to them He would even use anthropomorphic language. That is expressions about Himself like having hands and eyes to describe His strength and sight. God manifested Himself in these ways to reveal Himself to man who could not see Him. But, given that God is not limited by space and time these were but shadows.

But then, the greatest good news ever to fall on the ear of humanity was announced by the angel to Joseph, "Joseph, the son Mary is going to have is Emmanuel – God with us." "Joseph, the infinite, invisible God outside time and space is invading time and space and you will see God with your own two eyes." "Joseph, God is going to ultimately reveal Himself in Jesus who will save His people from their sins."

You see, when it says "[Christ] is the image of the invisible God." It not only is saying something ontologically about Christ (meaning that His being, essence, nature being one with the Father), but it is also saying something about His role as revealer of God. John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God, but [Jesus] God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has declared him." "Declared" literally in that verse means/could be translated as "exegeted." Jesus has "exegeted" the Father. Wow. Remember, what that word exegete means? It means to draw out in order to see. John 1:18 is saying Jesus who is one with and equal in divine being with the Father has drawn out and put out in the open for all to see the essence of the Father. For the disciples to have seen and us now to see in Scripture the way Jesus spoke to people and acted toward them and his attitude toward them – that is seeing the essence of the Father.

Reformer John Calvin helps a lot of this come together for us when he writes, "For Christ is the image of God because He makes God in a manner visible to us...For in Christ He shows us His righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, His entire self. We must, therefore, take care not to seek Him elsewhere; for outside of Christ, everything that claims to represent God will be an idol" (John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 308. "The image, the revealer of the invisible God." God's revealer for Himself is God.

The burning question in humanity has always been, "What is God like?" Answer: Look at Jesus. Look into the face of Jesus Christ. "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). Jesus said to His disciples, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (Jh 14:9).

So, the word “image” speaks of Christ’s revealing role, representative role. But, that is only possible because the other meaning the word “image” carries. Which is to be the very substance or essential embodiment of something or in this case someone. Hebrews 10:1 helps us to see this shade of the meaning to “image.” It says, “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the very image of the things.” “Image” there’s our word *Eikon*. And as it’s contrasted there with “shadow” we clearly understand that “image” means “the things themselves as seen.”

We learn Jesus is the very image of the Father meaning Jesus is the exact expression of deity. It’s not just that he resembles God, but is God manifest. Hebrews 1:3 states, “[Jesus] is the radiance of [God the Father’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature.” Philippians 2:6, “[Jesus] is the very form of God...equal with God.” Colossians 1:15 says, “Jesus is (I repeat is) the image of...God.”

Of course, at the very beginning of time Adam, the first man, was “made in the image and likeness of God” (Gen 1:26). So, humans are the image of God. Not a perfect image, but an image. In other words, if we study what the Bible has to say about man we learn things about God. For example, since man is a rational, personal personality, we learn therefore that God is also personal. He has intellect, will and emotions. Also, since man has a conscience (an innate sense of conscience) within himself that indicates that God must be a moral, spiritual being.

So, man is like God, but man is not the same as God. Again, he is **made** in the image of God. But, Christ “**is** the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4, Col 1:15). At His incarnation, Christ did not become or was made into the image of God. He eternally was, is and always will be the image of God. He is the exact representation. Man is only the finite (and fallen at that) image of God, but Christ is the infinite, perfectly sinless image of God. He is God. Jesus is the full and final revelation of God. Only God could reveal God.

And why did He come to reveal Himself? Because His original image in us has been marred by the fall. And that needs to be corrected. His proper image needs to be restored. The purpose of revealing Himself was to redeem us. Revelation for the Purpose of Redemption.

The problem is not that we fail to bear God’s image essentially – His essence. Adam before sinning did not bear the image of God essentially. Adam never possessed God’s incommunicable attributes like omnipotence, immutability, omniscience, or omnipresence. Adam and we are human not divine. Man never has been and never will be divine. The problem is not essential (essence). The problem is moral. In other words, with Adam and now us since we’re “in Adam” the image has been distorted morally.

But the good news is that when sinners are converted and become Christians, God has promised that His image will be restored in them. Let’s understand that “image” for the Christian isn’t just limited to manifestation of Christ outwardly as beheld by the eye (although one day we will see him with our eyes). But there is also an inward manifestation of Christ’s image to the heart’s eye of the believer. We see what we never saw before as sinners. Again I quote 2 Cor 4:6: “God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). As finite people our hearts could not comprehend the infinite God. But God in grace manifested Himself in Jesus to our hearts and impressed His image upon them. Think about it. There were many people who physically saw Jesus with their own eyes. They saw God in the flesh walk in their midst, yet the image of God wasn’t pressed on their heart. Do you remember what Jesus said to Peter after Peter’s great confession of faith: “Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). And Jesus said back to Peter, “Peter, this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven (v 17).” Seeing Jesus physically wasn’t enough. You might feel gyped and think people back then had an advantage to believe that we don’t have today, but that’s not true. This is not a physical issue, but a spiritual issue. In fact Jesus said to Thomas after His resurrection (right after Thomas says to Jesus, “My Lord and My God”) Jesus says, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed” and then Jesus says (I love this because it’s Jesus speaking directly to me and you today) “Blessed are those who have not seen [Me] and yet [they]

believe” (Jh 20:29). My point is, this is **not** a physical, sight issue. It is a spiritual, sight issue. It is God opening our eyes.

Without God’s inward intervention none of us would see with our heart that Jesus is “the express image of God.” Jesus said in John 6:44 “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” Which by the way, that word “draw” in the Greek is actually more powerful than our English expression. Do you know how that very same Greek word is translated numerous times else where in the New Testament as “drag” *helkuo* (Jh 18:10; Acts 16:19; 21:30; Jh 21:6; James 2:6). Jesus similarly says in Jh 6:65 “No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” Although Jesus came to reveal the Father, no one could recognize Jesus unless the Father reveals him. In Luke 10:22, we read, “No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Some people in pride want to chaff at what Jesus says in these verses and take some credit for their dead, blind hearts discovering Him. Personally, I just figure Jesus knows what He is talking about on this score.

Romans 8:29 says, “For whom He foreknew (that word is a relationship word, not just knowing something will happen in the future. It’s much richer than that. It’s knowing someone in relationship). “Foreknew” (Christian He knew you in relationship before the foundation of the world). “For whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” When Christ redeems us He promises to fully transform our marred image to a sinless image. We will be glorified. The next verse in Romans 8:30 states, “And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Before time and you ever existed, God has had in mind restoring His image in you. Can you see why Christ is superior to mankind because of His unique relationship with God the Father?

So, what is God’s will for us now in this stage of our salvation called “sanctification?” This stage in which we’re saved, but we’re still sinners? First, I’d say we should delight just being in the family. And take great delight that every day you’re looking a little more like your hero, big brother Jesus. This is the preparation stage. Later in Col 3:10 Paul tells us that “[we have] put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of [our] Creator.” Day by day the image is being restored. We should pray the prayer of Thomas Chisholm in his hymn “O To Be Like Thee” when he prays, “Stamp Thine own image deep on my heart.”

Therefore, let us not “be conformed to this world” but let us “be conformed to the image of Christ” as our minds are transformed to think as He does. This is giving Christ the preeminence (1<sup>st</sup> place) in our lives which the epistle of Colossians is calling us to.

Let’s pray.