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The Commitment of Christ

Calvary Baptist Church, New Haven

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**Scripture Reading:**

Colossians 1:15-23

1. He is the images of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
2. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.
3. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 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, 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.

**Introduction:**

In the text we’re looking at for today, Paul is writing to the church in Colossae, and, among other things, he is primarily addressing a heresy (or false teaching) that’s been going around, which has confused many of the Christians there. In the letter, we find that these false teachers are reintroducing legalistic practices from Judaism (2:11; 2:16). Instead of teaching salvation as something freely given by God in Christ, the false teachers teach that salvation is something to be earned through esoteric knowledge and observance of rituals. The message of the false teachers, in short, is this: you are saved if you possess a lot of special knowledge and do a lot of religious things.

So, in order to help the Colossian believers discern what is true, Paul writes this letter that we have here in front of us. Notice, Paul doesn’t begin by telling the Colossians what it is that they have to *do* in order to distinguish themselves from the false prophets; rather, Paul begins in chapter 1 by speaking of Christ’s preeminence, that is, Christ’s Lordship over all things. Why do you think that Paul starts by giving them a portrait of Jesus rather than with practical advice? I think Paul makes this move because to begin with practical advice would play into the false teachings he’s trying to refute in the first place. Paul understands that Christian conduct is utterly meaningless if it does not proceed from a place of faith in knowing who Christ is.

Like the Colossians, Christians who happen to be Asians or Asian Americans are inundated with similar teachings which often confuse our understanding of who Christ is and the role he plays within our daily lives. For most of us, we understand the challenges of what it means to be first, second, third generation Asian Americans living in the United States. We’ve taught our children, or have inherited from our parents, some notion of what a successful life looks like. For me, it was working hard to pay the mortgage, getting good grades and test scores, obtaining a prestigious college education, finding a well-paying white collar job, marrying a certain kind of person, living in an affluent community and safe neighborhood, going to church every Sunday, saying and doing a lot of nice things, and so on. I’m sure many of you can relate to what I am talking about. Whether it be Korean or Chinese cultures, we are generally told that happiness, and thus our sense of worth, can be found in *doing* and *achieving* these sorts of things for ourselves.

And I think this is why the Christian gospel is so counterintuitive, particularly for Asian Americans. We cannot fathom that the fullness of who we are – our dignity and freedom – is unconditionally given to us by God and only in God. If we are honest, what the false teachers are teaching probably resonates with us more naturally than what the gospel teaches because we are culturally and socially conditioned to think that our inherent worth comes by way of our own efforts.

I know that this year Calvary is working through what it means to be committed to Christ, which excites me not only because Christ is worth knowing but because he is also worth *following*. This is the task of discipleship, the life we are called to for those of us who profess faith in Christ Jesus. My concern, however, isn’t necessarily that Calvary would fall short regarding the practical aspects of discipleship, that is, in the ‘doing’ of things. My worry is that Calvary would be so caught up in the presentation of a Christian image that they would fail to know and experience the grace and love of Christ in the innermost parts of their being. My worry is that good Christians in this place would miss the entire point of the gospel, and simply use it as another means of securing for themselves a sense of worth that does not actually come from Jesus Christ.

That is why this passage from the first section of Paul’s epistle to the Colossians is relevant for us. Here, Paul is laying the groundwork *for* discipleship. In illustrating the supremacy and love of Christ, Paul is showing us that whatever commitment we make to Christ it is always preceded by the unrelenting commitment Christ first makes to us. Thus, as we think about what it means to be committed to Christ, it’s important for us to step back and reflect upon what allows any commitment on our part to be possible in the first place. So, what does Christ’s commitment to us look like? And how does that then serve as the foundation from which we can offer our lives to God? These are the questions we will be considering in our time together by looking at three main aspects of Christ’s commitment to us: 1) The Lordship of Christ; 2) The Redemptive Activity of Christ; and 3) The Ongoing Faithfulness of Christ.

**1) The Lordship of Christ**

In vv.15-17, Paul give us a unique portrait of Jesus, a portrait we’re not entirely used to. We’re accustomed to thinking of Jesus as the great rabbi (or teacher) who went around teaching in parables and performing miraculous signs. Here, though, Paul is portraying Jesus as the second person of the trinity when he writes “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” In other words, Paul is saying that Christ is not just a human being, but is also fully God who shares in the divine status of the Father.

When Paul writes that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, this should not be taken to mean that Christ is receiving from God something that does not already inherently belong to him. For instance, you and I are made in God’s image, and so we receive from God what is essentially not our own. That is, we are in the image of God insofar as God gives to us that image which is fully his. For Jesus, however, he does not receive the image in the way you and I receive it from God. Paul writes to tell us that Jesus *is* the image of God, an image which properly belongs to him, which can only be possible if Jesus is actually who he says he is, viz., the Son of God.

In this, Paul is refuting the false teachers who are saying that Jesus is not truly divine. He does so by showing us that all that we confess to be true of God to be true of Christ as well. So, we can say, along with Paul, that Christ creates all that is “in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible”; everything that exists is created by him. Let that sink in for a minute… Christ, the Son of God, is the agent through which the Father speaks the world into being. But what does that mean? Does God just wind us up and then leave the unfolding of our lives to the course of chance? Absolutely not!

Paul tells us that Christ not only creates us but is intimately involved in our lives. He writes in v.17, “[H]e is before all things, and *in him all things hold together*.” Nothing that exists, in other words, can exist apart from Christ. Christ creates us to be the sort of beings that have to constantly return to him again and again for spiritual and physical sustenance. But even now, the very fact that you and I are here is because Christ wills to hold together the molecules that constitute our bodies. The reason why you and I are alive at this moment is because Christ enables us to draw our next breath. Indeed, he holds *all* things together.

However, we are not here to exist for the sake of existence. Because Christ has made us, he has made us for the purpose of knowing him, our Creator. This means that we are not at liberty to choose for ourselves what it is we can and cannot do. If Christ has created us and the world, then that means our purpose in this world can only be found in the one who has created it. Sin, which we’ll talk about more later, is precisely when we choose to turn away from God’s purposes for our lives, and turn inward to create for ourselves a life that does not hold Christ at the center. This is what happened with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when they chose to rebel against God by seeking to be their own gods.

In these opening verses, what do we see? We see that Paul is describing Jesus as the one who is Lord. He is showing us how it is that Christ reigns over all things and righteously governs all things. But why is this good news for us? What we discover in this passage is that *control* ultimately belongs to Jesus Christ since he has created us and sustains us. We often come to church confessing this, right? We say, “I trust you, Lord.” But I ask you does the reality of your life, especially during the mundaneness of the week at home, work, or school, actually match up to what you confess here at church on Sundays? Do we actually acknowledge and allow Christ to be Lord over our lives?

Don’t we often try to micromanage and control every detail at work, and obsess over the little things at home because we are afraid of things not working out according to our plans? Aren’t we often frustrated because things don’t always happen in our own timing? Aren’t we often disappointed or angry with people because they aren’t necessarily who we’d like them to be?

I think in these sorts of situations, when we become frustrated or disappointed, we might not be faithfully entrusting to God our lives. In these sorts of situations, the way we respond to difficulties and hardships reveals what we actually believe to be true in our hearts. Either Christ is Lord or something/someone else is. But you cannot serve two masters. Commitment to Christ begins in knowing Christ’s commitment to us *as* Lord. He is the God who created us and the one who graciously sustains us *so that* we would come to know his goodness and experience his love for us.

Our constant need to do things, I suspect, is because we don’t actually trust that Christ is who he says he is, although he has so clearly demonstrated to us that he is good and can be trusted. Christ beckons us to life *with* him – not merely for him. However, we have to release control to Christ, and trust him as Lord over our lives. We are anxious because we think we need to control everything, and that is why our worlds fall apart when things don’t go according to our plans. We are anxious because we ultimately don’t trust in God; we don’t actually believe that he is in control. We don’t really believe that he knows what he is doing.

In these verses, Paul is giving us a holistic picture of who Christ is: He is undeniably Lord. And so, Jesus reigns over all things – from earthly kingdoms to the smallest details of our lives. But this still leaves unanswered a crucial question: “How do we know that we can trust him?”

**2) The Redemptive Activity of Christ**

In v.19, Paul tells us that God takes on human form for the purpose of reconciliation. Let’s unpack what he means by this. First, what is reconciliation? Essentially, reconciliation is bringing peace where there is enmity. So, for instance, if I wrong my friend by eating his last french fry, then there is enmity between us because he wanted to eat the last fry I took without asking. Hopefully, I’m a decent person and later apologize to my friend for my impolite table manners, which he then forgives me for. In doing so, my friend chooses to no longer hold that offense against me. In other words, he releases me from my mistake, and does not allow that error to define our friendship moving forward. As a result, we have reconciled. It’s a silly example, but you get the point.

Notice, reconciliation presupposes some sort of offense – whether it be small or great. But in our case with God, it’s different. Any offense against God is serious and deserves the penalty of death. You might be thinking: “That sounds so harsh… Why?” This is why: because God is an infinite and holy God. Any offense against an infinite God – small or large – deserves eternal damnation because it offends God to an infinite degree by virtue of who he is. In the case of the stolen french fry, I might be able to make up for it by buying my friend a new basket of fries in addition to my sincere apology. However, if you have infinitely offended an infinitely holy God, how are you supposed to make up for that?

You can’t – which is why our proper punishment is eternal death and separation from God. I know some of you here might be thinking “my sins aren’t that bad.” “At least I’m not as bad as that person over there” or “at least I didn’t sleep with that guy’s wife” or “do drugs at that party like everyone else.” Be that as it may, that sort of response already reveals the deeper sin underlying your heart. It’s this false sense of self-righteousness, making you believe that you are exempt from any form of error. Big offense or not, Paul tells us in Romans 3:23, “for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” There is no one here today that is free from guilt and shame.

Whatever specific offenses you and I have committed against God, at the root of it we share in the collective sin of humanity, which goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. That is, we share the sin of usurping the throne of Christ and declaring ourselves as lord. Christ created us for communion with him so that we would come to experience the fullness of his love for us. Yet, true communion with God can only occur when we acknowledge that God is the Creator and Lord, and we are his creation.

This is what God had intended for us from the beginning. But when we don’t allow God to be God, then our lives fall into utter ruin and chaos since we are trying to take on a role that can never be ours. You see, we have fallen short of God’s design for our lives. We have deeply offended him. And the reality is we live in sin which taints the very fiber of our being. This is why we are unable to have proper communion with God because we cannot undo the sin we’ve committed against him. It’s naïve to think that if I can just be a better son or daughter, or tithe a bit more next week at church, or pray a little longer, then I can make it up to God. No! You sinned and there’s nothing you can do. Once it’s done, it’s done. And this is why the gospel is such good news for us.

While it would’ve been perfectly fitting and just for God to hand us over to death, Paul tells us that that is not what God chooses to do. Instead of condemning us, God chooses to save us. He writes, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” The fullness of God comes to us in Christ so that God would reconcile us to himself. Although we are the ones who turned our backs against God, God nonetheless takes pity on us and shows us mercy instead.

By taking upon himself a human body, in Christ, God shows us what it means to be truly human. We are living in a time where philosophies abound. In movies, books, magazines, television shows, advertisements, everyone is competing for your attention. And the world is trying to tell you that if you speak a certain way, dress a certain style, drive a certain car, live in a certain home, then you’ll reach the full potential of your humanity. The world is telling you that if you can measure up to these standards, then you’ll be truly happy and satisfied. However, Christ tells us something different. Contrary to what the world says, Christ teaches us weakness not power, humility not pride, sacrifice not selfishness, peace not violence, love not hatred, mercy not vengeance.

According to worldly standards, Christ was an utter failure: he was born into poverty, had no assets to his name, never married or had children, and died an excruciating and humiliating death. Yet he has captivated the world ever since. How is that possible? Christ’s life was not consumed with furthering himself and his own interests. Instead, Christ came to serve, and he took upon himself the penalty for our sin by dying on the cross. Thus, whatever offense we’ve caused God Christ assumes it as his own so that we wouldn’t have to endure God’s wrath, the wrath that we deserve.

We come back to the question we asked at the beginning: how do we know we can trust God with our lives? How do we know he is good and worthy of all that we have to give? Look to the cross of Jesus Christ, the place where he literally bled out for us so that you and I would not have to live in a reality ruled by sin and death. Because of what Christ has done for us, we no longer have to worry that damnation will be our inevitable end. At the site of the cross, God displays his heart for us. He shows us how much he loves us; God shows us to what lengths he’d go for us. As Paul writes in Philippians (2:6-8): “Though Christ was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

We can trust Christ as the Lord of our lives because the kind of Lord that Christ is is one who lays down his life for his sheep. When we think about what it means to be committed to Christ, we always have to bring ourselves back to this place. Christ demonstrates his commitment to us with his very life, and shows us the character of his Lordship over our lives through his death and resurrection: Christ did not come to be served but to serve. In all this, Christ conquers sin and death forever. He frees us from the bondage of our addictions and our lustful desires. Thus, our broken relationship with God has been restored by virtue of what Christ has done, and because we are now no longer beholden to the flesh we can live lives of deep joy and satisfaction as we were made to.

Church, we must remember this: we are no better than the world. We shouldn’t think that just because we come to this place every Sunday that we are somehow superior to others. The only difference is that we have been so blessed to know the love of God through Christ Jesus. We must remember, that although we are justified in Christ, we are justified as *sinners* – and this destroys any trace of smugness or self-righteousness we have in us. And I pray you don’t forget that, lest you cease to be the church of Jesus Christ.

All of our operations thus proceed from grace because, as Paul writes, Christ is the head of the body, the body constituted by redeemed sinners like us. As Jesus says in Luke 5:32, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” Let us remember what the church actually is: we are sinners who desperately need more of God’s grace each day. That grace, however, does not only cover our sins and restore us to God, but it empowers us to live lives of boldness, to be agents of hope in a fallen world.

To summarize, we’ve looked at how Christ is rightfully the Lord over all things. Then we considered how Christ demonstrates to us that he can be trusted with all things, including our lives. Here, for the third and final point, we look at how Christ remains faithful to us throughout our lives.

**3) The Ongoing Faithfulness of Christ**

In v.21, Paul addresses the Colossians as those “who once were alienated and hostile in mind.” That is, they once were estranged from God, but Christ, as we have discussed, has reconciled them to himself “by his death”. Thus, the fact that they are no longer God’s enemies but his friends is because Christ gives them the faith by which they can join him in his life with God. And this point is important for us.

A common theological misconception is seeing one’s relationship with God as a give-and-take. “God, I’ll do this for you, but that means you have to do this for me.” From what we’ve already seen, we are in no position to be making those kinds of demands from God. But that’s how we sometimes think of it, right? When God doesn’t pull through for us, we grow bitter and refuse to go to church or pray until he makes the situation favorable. This sort of attitude, however, comes from a place in thinking that once one is a Christian one is always a Christian. This mindset makes one think that they are entitled to make demands of God in this manner.

But, according to one theologian, faith isn’t necessarily something one is guaranteed for the rest of his or her life, at least not from a human standpoint.[[1]](#footnote-1) Just like we can’t earn salvation, we can’t work towards faith. In other words, faith doesn’t come from memorizing a lot of passages from scripture, or praying a lot of prayers, although God certainly can and does use these things to bring us to faith. Faith, however, is something that has to be continually given to us by God as we daily profess Christ as Lord and Savior, which even that we cannot do apart from God’s grace. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12:3, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.’” This ought to lead us to a posture of humility and repentance. If we ever come to a point where we see faith as something possessed rather than something divinely bestowed, then we misunderstand what faith really is.

In vv.21-22, Paul says that faith is a possibility because of what Christ has done for us on the cross, which he then gives to those who by his grace profess his name. And in the following verse, Paul does something interesting: he not only shows us how faith is the outcome of what Christ has done for us, but also how that can only take root in our hearts *insofar as we continue in the faith that Christ gives us*. In saying all this, I am in certain ways trying to destabilize these false notions of faith; I am trying to undermine any and all notions that would say we can play a part in achieving these things for ourselves.

But some of you might be worried upon hearing this. “If Christian faith is something that can only be given by God, then doesn’t that make faith a fickle thing?” “How do I know God won’t take faith away from me?” “How can I have any assurance that my faith is genuine?” Again, I invite you to look to the cross. The assurance of your faith rests in Christ’s love for you. God desires for you to know him and to trust in him. The cross of Christ displays God’s promises to you that he is for you, and is faithful even when you are not. For the psalmist (73:26) writes, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” In this regard, the faith you and I receive freely from God is not only true but it is *far stronger* than what we can come up with for ourselves because it rests on the sure foundation of God’s love and God’s promises for us.

True faith does not rely on our own accomplishments, but rather rests in the hope of God’s glory. Some of us in here, if we are honest, don’t have that faith. And that’s okay; I invite you to ask God for that gift. All you have to do is ask, for scripture tells us that God is eager to give his children good gifts. Others of us are merely pretending – acting like we have faith by putting on a show. We come to church, say the right things, and go through the motions. But you know that that is not what God ultimately desires from you. If that’s you, I invite you to receive something better, a faith that brings life and rest; a faith that transforms you from the inside out so that your good works become the overflow of the grace you’ve received in your heart. And for those of us whose hearts have genuinely received from God this Spirit-infused faith, and have experienced its life-giving power, I encourage you to give more of yourselves each day so that in losing your life you might find it: sacrifice your time, energy, and money to meet the needs of those who are struggling.

By your life, display the goodness of the gospel so that others would come to see and know the love of Christ Jesus our Lord. Christ demonstrates his ongoing faithfulness to us in this, so how can we not share this good news with others? How can we not give our lives away for Christ’s kingdom?

**Conclusion:**

When we consider what commitment to Christ looks like, we must always remember that that proceeds from the starting point of Christ’s commitment to us, that is, in his Lordship, reconciling activity, and ongoing faithfulness towards us.

That is why the sacrament of baptism is so beautiful and compelling since it depicts exactly this. It portrays through visible and tangible means our profession of faith: that we die to ourselves and find new life in Christ. We submerge beneath the waters to die a death like his, but then emerge to share in a resurrection like his. Baptism is the sign of the promise that Christ makes to us, the promise that he will be faithful to the very end; that even when we let go, Christ holds on to us. It is the promise that when things don’t make sense or injustice abounds, that Christ knows what he’s doing and that one day soon he will make all things new.

For those of us who have been baptized, I encourage you to continually look back to it, to be reminded of the promises of Christ. As you proceed to discern what it means to follow Jesus more faithfully this year, remember that even when you are faithless Christ is still faithful. And for those who have yet to be baptized or remain undecided, I encourage you to take those next steps – whatever that may be. But know that you can fully give yourselves over to Christ, and you don’t have to hold anything back, because Christ can be trusted. He came for you, he died for you, and he rose again for you.

I know this sermon might have been frustrating for many of you because it isn’t all that practical. I suppose, in some ways, it isn’t, but that would be the point: to remember first the commitment Christ makes to us, for that reminds us that our lives are only a *response* to what Christ has done. So, church, as you work out your salvation with fear and trembling, would you do so in the freedom of knowing how committed Christ is to *you*. We can serve God because he has given us the *grace* to do so – because he created us, because he saved us, and because he goes with us.

Thanks be to God.

**Benediction:**

Go now in the name of God the Father, the one who created you in his image, for the sake of loving communion with him

In the name of God the Son, Jesus Christ, who is the image of the invisible God, in whose death and resurrection God reveals his gracious love for us

And in the name of the Holy Spirit, who goes with you, sustains you, transforms you, and empowers you to bring light and healing into a hurting and broken world

Amen.

1. See the works of St. Augustine, Karl Barth, and Søren Kierkegaard for examples of this. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)