



Supreme In the Church

Colossians 1:18

David Sunday December 15, 2019

I want to take a moment for us to thank Dan and Holly for all the work you did in putting together a beautiful concert on Thursday night with Sandra McCracken. That was such a wonderful time, and it was so good to see so many people here.

Now let's worship God as we listen to His Word from Colossians 1:15-20. It's all about the supremacy of Jesus Christ. God says, "This is My beloved Son. Listen to Him." Let's look at Him and prepare to listen to Him as we read His Word:

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

This is the third week we've spent looking at this wonderful paragraph and I want our focus to be on verse 18. So let me read it again, this time out of the Christian Standard Bible: "*He is also the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.*"

The question is: does Jesus Christ have first place in your life? What would your family members say if they were asked: "Does Jesus Christ have first place in your life?" Or your friends or co-workers? The claim God's Word is making over us today is that Jesus Christ must have first place in everything. He will have first place in everything. It is His indisputable right to claim first place over our lives and over everything in the universe. Anyone who withholds from Christ the supremacy He deserves does so at the peril of his or her own soul.

This morning I want to defend that claim by answering why Christ must have first place in everything, and then I want to apply it by looking at how the supremacy of Christ should make a difference in our lives. But first, let's pray.

Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes, thank You for making Yourself known to us. Thank You that You, the invisible, became visible, the untouchable became holdable and huggable, so we can know You and experience You. There are many people in our lives, Lord, who don't see Jesus Christ as great and do not have Him as preeminent over their lives. We want them to know You, Lord. They're not going to see Your greatness if they can't see Your "great-us."

So we pray, Lord, that You would work in us to bring all our thoughts and affections, all our activities and ambitions and aspirations, under the supremacy of Jesus Christ, that He would hold first place over all we are, over all we have, over all we think and over all we hope to be, for He alone is worthy of the preeminence. We pray this in His name. Amen.

1. Why Christ must have first place in everything.

We usually don't like it when someone acts like they are first. This past Thursday night when I was driving to the Sandra McCracken concert, I was going down Red Gate and had just crossed the bridge. I was on the phone with my son, who was a little bit ahead of me because he drives fast. He told me there was an accident at Randall and Red Gate. I was on Red Gate, waiting for the light at Route 31, right by the high school, planning to go straight across. But then I realized the road's probably closed, so I'll turn left on 31, then go right on Crane and get to the church quicker.

So I put my blinker on politely and started nudging my way into the left lane. I thought the person behind me was being nice and gladly yielding first place to me. I was wrong. As I started cutting in line, there was a loud, long blaring of the horn that let me know I had egregiously violated the rules of driver's etiquette. I should have known my place. Now if you happened to be driving down Red Gate at about that time, and you're just now realizing and repenting of the fact that you blared your horn and let out your road rage on someone in a Toyota Camry, I forgive you. We're good.

When someone loves to be first, it's a sign of arrogance. This is what the Apostle John spoke of in that little letter called 3 John about a man named Diotrephes, who loves to be first. He wanted the preeminence in the church. The Apostle John called that kind of attitude evil. That's how strong he was about that. But in Christ, it is not evil for Him to want to have first place. It is fitting. It's not only fitting that He should have first place in everything—it's the only sensible response to Who He is. Why should He have first place in everything? Well, because—as we've already seen—He is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).

That's wonderful news. Lord Byron, the poet, once said, "If God isn't like Jesus, He ought to be." I agree. An evangelist named Glen Scrivener put it like this:

When someone tells you they believe in God, ask them which God they believe in. If they don't believe in God, ask them which God they don't believe in. It's very likely that the God they don't believe in is some kind of heavenly giant, a tyrant, a distant individual who's high on power, low on personality and love.

You know what? I don't believe in that God either. If that's what God was like, I don't think I'd want to believe in Him. I'd probably fight against Him. But let me tell you about Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He said in John 14:9, "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.*" He is the exact imprint of His nature. When you've seen Jesus, you've seen God. So He deserves to have first place because He's the image of the invisible God.

He's also the Firstborn over all creation, as we saw last week, which means He's the highest of all the kings on earth, He's got the highest rank, He's the heir of all things. The reason for that is in Colossians 1:16—everything in the universe was created by Him and through Him and for Him. I love this. All of creation is a gift of God the Father to God the Son. It's the overflow of the Father's love for His Son.

So when you gaze at the snow-peaked Rockies or the rugged coast of the Atlantic or the constellations in the sky, think of it this way: "Heaven and earth has a gift tag attached to it, and it reads 'Dear Son, this is how much I love You. Love, Your Father.'" Everything is testifying to the greatness of the Father's love for His Son. This galaxy, this planet, this body that you inhabit, this mind that enables you right now to ponder Who made you and why you're here and what's the purpose of our existence, every breath you take, the number of protons and neutrons and electrons in an atom—all of it, verse 17 says, is being held together by Christ. He created it all, He rules over it all, He sustains and upholds it all and He's the reason—the goal—for it all.

Then He Who is all this came down, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary. An "infant holy, infant lowly, for His bed a cattle stall. Oxen are lowing, little knowing that Christ the Babe is Lord of all." The Lord of all eternity became so small. As Chesterton put it, "The hands that had made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of cattle." He was too small to change His own clothes, too small to put food in His own mouth, too small to lift Himself up. He had to be cradled and carried in the arms of the virgin mother whom He had made and formed Himself.

Why? Why did He Who made all things become so small, so weak, so helpless? Why did He Who eternally existed in the form of God not consider equality with God something to be exploited, but instead emptied Himself? He made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant and being found in human likeness (Philippians 2:5-8). Why did He do this? Why did He leave His Father's throne above? He left His Father's house in order to cleave to His bride, so we would be made one flesh with Him.

That's what Colossians 1:18 is bringing us to: the union between Christ and His church. He's the Creator of it all, He's the Sustainer of it all—He's the One Who holds it all together—and He also is the Head of the body, the church. But hold on. Doesn't that sound a little bit anti-climactic? We've gone from Christ being the Ruler of all nature, above all earthly powers, sovereign over the spiritual realms above and below, why bother mentioning the church? Isn't that a little bit of a demotion from Creator of the universe down to Head of the church? Someone said, "If I was the creator of the universe, being the head of the church wouldn't thrill my heart." Maybe you resonate with that.

Last year Forbes did a survey of the most respected professions in America and do you know where pastors ranked? Forty-two percent. That means 58% of Americans don't have a very high opinion of church leaders today. Many people see church as a stuffy, outdated, irrelevant institution. In the words of Richard Chin, it's "something at least to be grudgingly tolerated; at worst to be opposed or preferably even eradicated." That's about how popular the church is.

Thankfully, Jesus doesn't see Head of the church as a step down. No, this is where His heart is; this is what His heart is throbbing about; this is what He longs for. In His great friendliness to us, He Who is before all and above all and beyond all connects Himself to us below. He joins Himself to us as intimately as my head is joined to my body. The Creator of all things comes down and says to His people, for Whom He's going to lay down His life to redeem, "From now on, you and I will be inseparable. We will be connected in a living, lasting, loving union that nothing on earth or in heaven above or below the earth will be able to sever or separate."

Jesus is not embarrassed by His church. He is her Founder and her one Foundation. He is her Savior and her Owner. He is her Preserver and her Hope. He is her Lover and her Beloved. He is her Righteousness and her Holiness. He is her Head, Her Bridegroom and her King. And Christ is not a figurehead—not like the Queen of England, who really only has an honorary, advisory position. No, Christ's authority is functional. It's real. It's absolute. He's the Head of the church, and as our Head, He is our Representative. When we talk about "counting heads," we realize the head represents the body.

Adam was the representative head of all humanity and where did that get us? A man of earth, a man of dust—in Adam all of us sin and in Adam we all die. But praise God there is a second Adam, a last Adam, from above, Who reinstates us in His love. He is the Man of heaven and represents all those who have been chosen by God the Father, redeemed through His blood and who come to believe in Him on earth.

As our Representative, everything that is His becomes ours. Everything that rightfully belongs to Him also belongs to His body, to whom He is connected. He is the Source of our life, just like my head is the source of all that is in me. You could cut off other parts of my body (which I really wouldn't want you to do) and I could live without them. But the minute you cut off my head, it's over. I couldn't live and you couldn't reattach it. Christ is the Source of His church's life, so when the church becomes severed from Christ, it's no longer the church. It's no longer alive. It's dead.

As our Head, He is our Governor and our Guide. Just like the brain, the mind determines all our steps, actions, thoughts and words, so Christ determines the steps, actions, thoughts and words of His people. As our Guide, He's the only Teacher of doctrine. Judge everything you're ever taught through this lens: Would Jesus Christ say amen to that? Would Jesus agree with that? If He wouldn't, don't believe it.

As our Head, He's the only maker of spiritual laws. When someone says, "You need to do this" or "You need to do that," you should ask, "Is that coming in the authority of Christ or is that just some man-made rule?" He's the only One Who has the right to bind our conscience and administrate our lives. Therefore we should yield no authority to anyone except to the authority of Christ. And when we do yield to the authority of Christ and obey Him as our Lord, then we don't need to fear anything else on earth, because He's Lord over it all and is ruling it all in such a way as to uphold, support and sustain His people. The church will not perish because, as the Head, He defends, guides, sustains and cherishes her. He is with her to the end.

As our Head, He is our Bridegroom and we are His bride. Just like God formed Eve by taking a rib out of Adam's side, so God formed a church from the pierced side of our Savior. We are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone. That's how closely He is united to us. He cleaves to us as a husband to his wife.

And as our Head, He is our Source of beauty. Think about it. Most of the animals crawl around with their faces to the ground, right? Once in a while they lift their heads, but normally they're walking with their heads down. But human beings stand upright and lift our heads high. Our faces are the most distinguishing feature about us. It's the most beautiful part of a human being. Listen to what Spurgeon d: "In Jesus Christ, all the beauty of the church is summed up."

He's the source of all our beauty. Take Christ away and where are we without Him? "A carcass, a ghastly corpse, bereft of all glory, because divided from its head." He's the Source of our beauty.

Friends, as our Head, wherever Jesus goes, we the body must follow. My head never goes anywhere and leaves my body behind. My body is carried by my head. The head sets the agenda. The head charts the course. The head blazes the trail. Where the head leads, the body follows which is wonderful news, because look at the next two lines of Colossians 1:18. He is the Head of the body, the church, and here it is: "*He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.*"

Where did Jesus go as our Head? He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. What happened? He lived the life we failed to live as the perfect image of God, then He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried and descended into Hades, the place of the dead. Jesus, our Head, took on everything that was destroying our humanity. He didn't shrink away from the dreaded Goliaths of sin and death and hell; He took them on. He came against those giant destroyers in the name of the Lord; He dealt the fatal blow and cut off the enemy's head.

After plunging down into the depths of the grave, He rose triumphant. On the third day He rose again from the dead, and in doing so He became the Firstborn from the dead. He's the only person who has died and been raised, never to die again. We know Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he had to die again. Not Jesus. He was raised to an immortal life over which death has no dominion. Here's the good news. Look at what Glen Scrivener says:

Where our Head has gone, we the body will follow. He's like a needle passing through thick black cloth and out the other side. He was the Firstborn coming through, but we are like the thread, pulled along behind.

When it says that He is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, it's saying He's the beginning of a new humanity over which sin no longer has dominion. He's the Trailblazer of a new creation where there will be no more sorrow, sin or sadness. In the first creation, all He had to do was speak, "Let there be light," and there was light. But to form this new creation He had to become one of us and live a human life in perfect obedience to God. Then He had to lay down that life on the cross as a ransom for sinners. God raised Him from the dead and when He did, Jesus began a new humanity.

So He's the King of kings not only over this creation, but He's also the Ruler of the age to come—an age when His saves people, His church, who will live with Him in a world with no more sin, no more sorrow, no more sickness and no more Satan. That's what we're looking forward to and that's why He alone must have first place in everything. Who else has even come close to accomplishing all that? So the hymn writer says:

Crown Him the Lord of life,
Who triumphed o'er the grave,
And rose victorious in the strife
For those He came to save.
His glories now we sing,
Who died, and rose on high,
Who died eternal life to bring,
And lives that death may die.

(From "Crown Him With Many Crowns" by Godfrey Thring)

He's the Firstborn from the dead.

2. How the supremacy of Christ should make a difference in our lives.

What impact should the supremacy of Christ have on us? And it certainly should. God is saying to us here, "Christ, My Son, has first place in the first creation; He will have first place in the new creation," and God is asking, "Do you agree with Me about the preeminence of My Son? Does He have first place in your life?" Charles Simeon put it like this: "The Lord Jesus should be to us now what He will be in a better world—our light, our life, our joy, our all," in the new creation. That's what He should be to us now.

Three points of application. The first is this: **reorder your life around Christ**. I heard Tim Keller preach a sermon on this. I don't think anyone could put it better than he did, so I'm going to draw some from him over the next few minutes and share with you how God was speaking to me through this sermon. Here's how Keller put it: "When a (heavy) truck goes over a bridge, there's a bridge-quake. When a big man goes over (thin) ice, there's an ice-quake. Whenever Jesus Christ goes into a person's life, there's a life-quake. Everything is reordered."

So if Jesus was just a Teacher or a great moral Example or a spiritual Guru, you could say, "I'll take some advice from Him, but I'll leave the rest. I'll take what I like; chewing the meat and spitting out the fat." But if He is Who this passage is saying He is, if He is God Himself Who created you, sustains you, redeems you, rules over you and promises to raise you from the dead if you are joined to Him—if that's Who He is, then you cannot relate to Him as if you're holding on to anything in your life that's non-negotiable. Any view, conviction, idea, behavior or relationship will keep you from saying, "Jesus, this is mine. I'm keeping this for myself. I'll take the rest of You, but I'm keeping this for me." You have to yield it all to Him. He might take it, or He might let you keep it. He might change it, or He might leave it as it is. But you have to say, "Jesus, You have first place in my life. You have first place over my finances, friendships, future and family. You have first place over my beliefs and worldview."

Imagine that your dearest friend is dying of a very rare cancer and it is bad, but you know there is a doctor who might have the cure. So you bring your friend to this great doctor who says, “I can give you a cure, but you can never eat chocolate again.” Your friend gives the doctor this incredulous look. “Chocolate? A life without chocolate? I don’t know. I’ll have to think about that. A cure for my disease, or a life with chocolate? I’m not sure.”

Translate that into following Jesus. Suppose your friend says to you, “I’ve heard this rumor. I’ve kind of caught this idea that Christians believe that when you follow Jesus, you can’t have sex outside of marriage. Is that really what you believe? If that’s really what you believe, I’m not sure I can do that.” Tim Keller says:

If there’s a God Whose service is perfect freedom, if there’s a God Who is the source of all beauty and truth, if there is a God Whom to know would result in all His wisdom and glory and power passing into you, so that for endless ages you would run and not be weary, you would walk and not be faint, His love and His joy and His glory would double in you every day forever—if there was even a chance that Jesus Christ was that God, how could you say, “Forget it. No sex for five years at least?”

If anything else in your life is supreme—whether it’s chocolate or sex or money or a precious person without whom you cannot imagine living—if anything else in your life is supreme, you will only see Christ in shadows. You will never come to know Him as He really is.

If you say, “Listen, I really would like to be a Christian, but there are certain things I simply will not give up. I won’t listen to what Jesus has to say about marriage, money, singleness, lust, anger or forgiveness. I don’t care what the Bible says about all that, because I want it.” That’s the language of supremacy. That’s saying, “Jesus, You’ll have to take second place to these things.”

Jesus doesn’t come into your life like that. He doesn’t come to just be a portion, a little supplement to your already good life. He’s not coming to make you a little bit better. When He comes, He says, “It’s all or nothing. I’ll either have all of you or you won’t have Me at all.” We’ve got to say to Him, “Jesus, Lord, I yield supremacy to You. Anything Your Word says, anything Your will touches, I’m not going to get in the way of that. I want You to have Your way with me. I want Your Word to be the ruling scepter of my life. I want Your will to be my will. As in heaven, so on earth, so in me. There’s no place in my life that I will say, ‘Lord, You can’t touch that.’”

That’s what it means to be a Christian. It means to have Jesus come down into your life and produce a life-quake, a reordering of priorities. Reorder your life around Christ.

The second application is to **rejoice in your union with Christ**. Whatever you need, your Head will provide. He is a gracious and glorious Head. He’s not defective. He doesn’t have a brain that’s getting old and has tumors in it. He is 100% pure and alive and good. He is able to

provide whatever the needs of His body require. If we require forgiveness, there's no guilt so great that His blood cannot cover and cleanse. If we require power to restrain the corrupting desires that still wage war within us and fight against His supremacy, there's nothing His Spirit cannot subdue and change and transform in us. So rejoice that you have a living, lasting, loving union with Christ.

In the letters of Paul, have you ever noticed how often he uses the phrase, "in Christ"? He's telling us, "This is what it means to be saved. It means that you are now united to Him Who is able to provide you everything you need and every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places". I love how Martin Luther said this: "The moment I make of myself and Christ two, I am all wrong. But when I see that we are one, all is rest and peace."

Come to this Communion Table, believers, and see—taste and see that you and Christ are one. He feeds you His body, He gives you drink of His blood, as if to say to you, "So united are we that My life has become your life. My blood has become your cleansing."

If you don't know that oneness with Jesus Christ, I want you to know that He's inviting you into that today. There's no one you'd rather be married to than Jesus. There's no one you'd rather be ruled by than this gracious Master. Know that He's offering His life to you today. Come and believe and receive Jesus Christ. Rejoice in your union with Christ.

Finally, **enlist in the mission of Christ**. We are His body. He is our Head. Where is our Head right now? At the right hand of the Father. Where is His body? Well, some of His body is with Him in glory and some of His body is here on earth. He has a mission for His body here on earth.

After World War II there was a church in Germany that had been bombed. Inside this church, there was a statue of Christ with His arms wide open. The inscription under the statue said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Some German students went into that church and started repairing this great edifice after the bombing. They were working on the statue, plastering and chiseling and putting it all back together again. They could get every part of that statue right, but not the hands. They were just too delicate. So they left the statue as it was without the hands. They put a new inscription underneath: "Christ has no hands but ours." They were echoing Teresa of Avila, who said:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which He blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are His body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

As His body, He has a mission for us to represent Him and reflect Him in this world. We all know that sometimes we go AWOL on that mission. Sometimes we forget who we are. Sometimes we lose sight of the fact that we're united to Christ our Head. Sometimes we're aware of all the ways we have not made Him first and supreme in our lives, then we realize we need His grace for that. So let's confess our sins to Him and look to Him for the grace we need, then come to His Table to be refreshed, renewed and recommissioned as His body in this world.

As those who are serving the Lord's Supper come forward, we're going to read a prayer of confession together. This was written by a South African Christian who is reflecting on what it means to be the body of Christ. When I first heard these words, I found them very probing, convicting and helpful. I'd like us to pray this together as our prayer of confession before we come to the Table.

You asked for my hands
That You might use them for Your purpose.
I gave them for a moment, then withdrew them
For the work was hard.

You asked for my mouth
To speak out against injustice.
I gave You a whisper that I might not be accused.

You asked for my eyes
To see the pain of poverty
I closed them, for I did not want to see.

You asked for my life
That You might work through me.
I gave a small part that I might not get too involved.

Lord, forgive my calculated efforts to serve you
Only when it is convenient to do so,
Only in those places where it is safe to do so,
And only with those who make it easy to do so.

Father, forgive me, renew me
Send me out as a usable instrument
That I might take seriously
The meaning of Christ's cross. Amen.

God's Word assures us of His ability and willingness to pardon everyone who trusts in His saving mercy. Hear these words of assurance.

*When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was drained as*

in the summer's heat. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not conceal my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:3-5, CSB)

If you are aware of God's heavy hand of discipline and conviction on you, He's not doing that to crush you. He's not doing that to destroy you. He's doing that to draw you out of the darkness and into the light of His love and into fellowship with Himself. Confess your transgressions to the Lord and He will forgive the iniquity of your sin.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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