

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Satan's Triple Threat to the Church" (Colossians 2)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 6/6/2010

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The Great Fact

Today we're beginning a new section in our study of the book of Colossians. We've come now to chapter two. I don't know how many of you noticed, but if you check you'll find that we spent forty-eight broadcasts, nearly an entire year, on Colossians chapter one. The reason we did that was simply this: The first chapter of the book of Colossians is one of the richest chapters in the entire Word of God.

If you've been following this series from the beginning, you may remember that we've been continually referring to the great central theme of the book of Colossians. The Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is declaring a great and central truth. That truth is that the Lord Jesus Christ, God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, God who came in human flesh, is preeminent in all things.

That is the great fact. You see, we don't *make* Jesus Lord. He *is* Lord of all. God the Father has given all authority in heaven and on earth into His hands. All authority in the created material universe, and all authority in the realms beyond time and space, is in the hands of the Lord Jesus Christ. That great and central fact is the theme of the entire book of Colossians.

The Meaning of Preeminence

The word "preeminence" that we find here in the book of Colossians literally means, "to be first" or "to hold first place" or "to be supreme." And Colossians 1:18 tells us that Jesus Christ holds first place, He is supreme, because He not only died for

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sinner, but God the Father raised Him from the dead – He is the “firstborn from among the dead.”

If you've been following this series from the beginning, you may also remember that we've been continually referring to the general outline of the book. That outline revolves around this central theme of the preeminence of Christ. The book of Colossians is in three main parts. And in each of those three parts, the Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit declares a different aspect of that great, central truth of the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

To remember the outline of the book of Colossians, all you have to do is remember three words that all begin with the letter D. First of all, chapter one is Christ's preeminence *declared*. Secondly, chapter two is Christ's preeminence *defended*. Thirdly, chapters three and four are about Christ's preeminence *demonstrated*. Christ's preeminence declared, defended, and demonstrated – that's the outline of the book of Colossians.

Paul's Teaching Pattern

Before we go on, I want to make one additional comment about the structure of the epistle to the Colossians. The pattern that Paul follows in this epistle is the pattern that he follows in all of his nine letters to the various churches. Here is the pattern: He presents sound doctrine first, and right living second. And the reason for that is that sound doctrine is the basis for right living. Sound doctrine is the basis for sanctified living.

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So Paul uses the first two chapters of Colossians mainly to present doctrine. He's teaching the Colossian believers about the Lord Jesus Christ, about what they are in Christ, and what they have in Christ. First of all, he reminds them of what they already know about the Lord Jesus Christ and the salvation they possess because they have believed on Him. He encourages them to hold on to what they already know. He affirms them in that truth. He strengthens their confidence in that truth.

And then Paul builds on that truth. He takes them more deeply into the truth. He builds on the knowledge they already have, in order to deepen their knowledge of Biblical truth. But Paul doesn't do that just to stuff their heads full of spiritual facts. That would do the Colossian believers no good, and in fact it might do them harm if they became puffed up and proud because of their spiritual knowledge.

But that is not Paul's purpose at all. After he instructs the believers in sound doctrine in chapters one and two, Paul uses chapters three and four of Colossians to teach the believers about right living, about sanctified living. And the instruction he gives them in right living is firmly and deeply rooted in the right doctrine that he has been teaching them in the first two chapters. The hinge-point of the book of Colossians is chapter 3, beginning at verse 1: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

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"If then you were raised with Christ" could also be translated, "Since you were raised with Christ." That's the Greek grammar of that particular sentence. Paul is saying, "Because the things I told you in the first two chapters are true – that Jesus Christ is God, that He is your Savior, that you were redeemed by Him and raised to newness of life in Him, and because of the spiritual knowledge you have in Him – because these things are true of Christ, and true of you, this is how you must live. Yes, you need to take hold of Biblical truth intellectually. But then you need to take what you know, and apply it to the way you live.

Review: Colossians One – Christ's Preeminence Declared

And so as we studied the first chapter of Colossians, we saw that under the heading of Christ's preeminence declared, there were four main sub-headings. First, in verses 1 through 14, Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Gospel. Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Gospel. The Gospel is all about Jesus Christ. The Gospel is all about knowing Him. The fruit of the Gospel is a life that is based on knowing Christ – as Paul puts it in verse nine, "that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding."

Secondly, in verses 15 through 17 of chapter one, we saw that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Creation. Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Creation. By Him all things were created, Paul tells us – and that includes us. And all things were created both by Him and *for* Him – all the things that are visible to the human eye, as well as all the things that are unseen.

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Thirdly in verses 18 through 23, we saw that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Church. Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Church. He is the Head of the church, and He has reconciled us to God the Father by His death on the cross, and by His death and resurrection He has set in motion the sequence of events that will lead to the consummation of all things – the coming of the New Heavens and New Earth, in which believers will live, free from sin and death forever.

And fourthly, in chapter one verses 24 through 29, we saw that Jesus Christ is preeminent in genuine ministry. Jesus Christ is preeminent in genuine ministry. Any ministry that is genuine Christian ministry teaches these truths about the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it in verse 28, that ministry involves warning every Christian, and teaching every Christian, so that every Christian may be presented perfect, or complete, or mature, in Christ Jesus.

Satan's Triple Threat to Believers and the Church

So that is what we have seen in Colossians chapter one – Christ's preeminence declared. And now as we come to chapter two, we are going to see Christ's preeminence defended. Paul defends Christ's preeminence against three dangers that every individual Christian, and every local church, constantly face. The Colossian believers faced them in their day, and you and I face them in our day.

These three dangers are Satan's triple threat to every believer individually, and to every church as a body. They are three of the things that Satan uses most often, to get believers off the track, and to get churches off the track. What he does is to get our

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focus off of the preeminence and the all-sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ, and onto other things that are false and deceptive.

So, what is this triple threat? What are these three dangers?

Threat Number One: Worldly Philosophies

First, there is the danger of pursuing empty philosophies, worldly philosophies, instead of Christ. We find this in chapter 2, verses 1 through 10. The danger of empty, worldly philosophies instead of Christ. Listen to what Paul has to say, in Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse one:

For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.

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Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit.” What kinds of worldly philosophies, empty philosophies, are people pursuing in our day? Which ones are the greatest threat to the church today? Let me suggest to you that there is one particular philosophy or mindset that is the greatest threat to the individual Christian and to the church as a body in our time, and that is the philosophy of postmodernism.

In the last four generations, the philosophy of postmodernism has come to dominate the way most people think in America, in Europe, and much of the rest of the world. Postmodernism teaches that “truth” is not absolute. Postmodernism teaches that truth is not transcendent. According to postmodern philosophers, man arrives at his own “truth.” *Feelings* are more important than *facts*. *Feelings* take precedence over facts. We live in an age when the saying, “How can it be wrong when it *feels* so right?” has become the order of the day, even in the church.

And so, in many churches today, the Bible is less and less accepted as the absolute standard of truth. Let me give you some statistics from reliable surveys of Evangelical church members today. Nearly 40% of the adults in Evangelical churches today, do not believe that the Bible is totally accurate. Nearly half of Evangelical church-goers today

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do not believe that Jesus Christ never committed sin. Over half do not believe that Satan is real. Nearly 60% of Evangelical church-goers today do not believe that Jesus Christ is the only Way to eternal life. They deny the very fact that the Apostle Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit has set forth in so much detail, and with absolute authority, in Colossians chapter one. Over half of Evangelical church-goers today believe that other religions, that the Bible says are false religions – over half of Evangelical church-goers today say that those other religions are equally valid ways to eternal life.

And today we see the effects of these things within the church. And the major effect is that there is open toleration of sin in the church today. To cite just one evidence of this, the divorce rate in the Evangelical church is just the same today as it is in the unbelieving world. There is no difference between the church and the rest of the world.

The fact is that because of the influences of postmodern philosophy, many Evangelical pulpits today are proclaiming a message that is not the authentic Gospel. And as a result, Evangelical churches, increasingly, are filled with people who have never truly been born again. And so it is no wonder that these people are not experiencing and exhibiting the fruits of Christian sanctification in their lives. Yet these very people – these lost people – are being encouraged to become active in the outreach activities of the church. And what does that produce? Well, in spiritual terms, they can only bring in more people like themselves. Thus the typical Evangelical congregation is in a downward spiral: The percentage of unbelievers in its ranks continually goes up; the percentage of genuine Christians continually moves toward

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zero; and within a surprisingly short time, the thinking and practices of the unbelieving super-majority – the postmodern philosophy – comes to dominate the church.

So that is threat number one of Satan's triple threat against the individual Christian and the church as a body – the threat of pursuing worldly philosophies instead of the preeminent Christ.

Threat Number Two: Legalism

Secondly, there is the danger of pursuing legalism instead of Christ. We find this in chapter 2, verses 11 through 17. The danger of legalism instead of Christ. Listen to what Paul has to say, in chapter two, beginning at verse eleven:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

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"Let no one judge you" in these things, Paul says. What does he mean? In order to understand that, we need to understand the Biblical definition of legalism. We might say that legalism is in some ways the opposite extreme of postmodernism. Legalism is anything that says that you have to do certain things, or you have to abstain from certain things, in order to gain merit or favor with God. That you have to conform to a list of do's and don'ts that you won't find in the Bible, and don't have clear authority from the Bible. This places the believer and the church in a kind of bondage, and once again, it takes the focus off of the all-sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ, and off of the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing about our sanctification, and it puts the focus on man's word instead of God's.

So that is threat number two of Satan's triple threat against the individual Christian and the church as a body – the threat of pursuing the bondage of legalism, being in bondage to men, instead of being servants of the preeminent Christ.

Threat Number Three: Man-Made Doctrines

And thirdly, there is the danger of pursuing man-made doctrines instead of Christ. We find this in chapter 2, verses 18 through 23. The danger of man-made doctrines instead of Christ. Listen to what Paul has to say in chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen:

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom

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all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations — “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

In the time of Colossians, the man-made doctrines were the ones that were being spread around by the Gnostics and the Judaizers. In our time, there are many purveyors of man-made doctrines that lead people away from the preeminent Christ. Roman Catholicism, the cults, the Purpose-Driven Church movement, the Emergent Church movement, the prosperity gospel preachers, the charismatic movement, those who teach various forms of what is termed the Federal Vision theology or the New Perspective on Paul – all of these things are rooted in man-made doctrines that twist Scripture, that have absolutely no genuine basis in the Word of God.

An Invitation to You

Notice the pattern here in Colossians chapter two: “Beware lest anyone cheat you” – verse eight. “Let no one judge you” – verse sixteen. “Let no one cheat you of your reward” – verse eighteen. Paul is warning the Colossians that this triple threat to the believer and the church – worldly philosophies, legalism, man-made doctrines – these

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things are a cheat, they are a lie, they are a fraud. Don't be taken in, Paul says. Keep your eyes and your minds focused on the preeminent Christ and on His Word alone.

I hope that you'll take these things to heart in your own life today, if you are a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ. And I hope that you'll stay with us in the coming weeks of this series as we look more closely at each of these triple threats to the church, and as we see the Apostle Paul demonstrating and defending the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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