

Colossians 1:15-20 “First-Place Jesus”

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Date: 04 August 2024

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We need the reminder of that song because life will disappoint you. Friends may let you down, but Jesus has not and will not fail us.

He won't. Amen? Amen. He won't. We just wrapped up several weeks this summer talking about our relationships with God, walking with Jesus.

What it looks like for us day by day as he meets us right where we are in our lives. If you were here, you'll remember that we marveled at the reality that God speaks to us.

So we treasure listening to him and his word and meeting him there. And then perhaps even more amazing that God listens to us and so we can speak to him in prayer and meet him there.

[1 : 09] We rejoiced in the gifts of baptism and the Lord's Supper to God's people to meet us there, to taste his grace together. Together. Right?

Right? And in the past couple weeks, Pastor Derek has so helpfully reminded us that God makes space for us so that we can share that space with others.

Because we walk with Jesus and meet him every day in our relationships with one another in this family and with our neighbors all throughout our lives and everywhere God takes us.

Now we are about to jump back into our study of John's gospel that we are over halfway through. We've been encountering the real Jesus, the historical man now in the final week of his life before the cross.

And this fall we get an inside look from his beloved disciple at these final intimate words to his disciples on the night that he's betrayed. It's going to be awesome.

[2 : 10] I can't wait to get back into that together but actually we're going to wait one more week.

Restart that study next Sunday. Today I want to remind us of the importance of our relationship with Jesus one more time.

Both so that we remember what we've been talking about, what we've learned this summer, to reflect on that together. And to kind of build a bridge toward diving back into John and remembering why it is we so desperately need to see Jesus, to listen to him, to love him.

As we go back to John and read more about him there. We never stop focusing on walking with, in relationship, Jesus. I want to look this morning at a hymn about Jesus in Colossians chapter 1.

I want to take a few minutes with you to take a deep breath of Jesus, to reflect on your life wherever you are, especially if you're starting a new year.

A new rhythm in many ways to consider what it could or should look like for Jesus to be in first place. For your walking with Jesus, moment by moment, day by day, to be the supreme purpose.

[3 : 34] The central foundation, the highest delight of your entire life. Let's read Colossians 1, beginning at verse 15.

God's holy, inerrant, inspired word about his son, Jesus. He is the image 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. 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.

[4 : 40] This is God's word. Let's ask for his help. Father, would you renew our hearts? Would you reorder our lives according to your glory and grace?

By your word? By your spirit? We ask you to do it even now for us this morning. Change us forever. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. I know many of you, like my family, have gotten to enjoy watching some of the Olympic competition this week.

See those golden moments when the athletes in first place step to the top of the podium to be honored as the greatest in the world.

Right? The fastest, the strongest, the best at their craft. Like these five amazing gymnast gold medalists.

[5 : 48] It was incredible to watch. Or like Katie Ledecky, the world's greatest distance swimmer who keeps finding herself on top of the podium year after year.

Can you imagine it? So many amazing, gifted athletes all gathered together in one place competing. And then out of all of those, for someone to finish in first place.

It's quite remarkable, isn't it? It's a great achievement. It's worthy of honor. That word first, the best, the top ranked in the world is used of Jesus several times in our passage today.

It has even deeper meaning, even broader implications for us to see how and for what reason Jesus is in first place.

I want us to do really two things this morning. First, for a few minutes, to wonder at the greatness of Jesus. And then for a few minutes, talk about what difference that actually makes in our lives.

[6 : 58] Is that greatness of Jesus coming home in the way that we relate to him and the way we live day in and day out? So, Paul starts here by first praising Jesus as first in creation.

That word firstborn, which will be repeated in verse 18 to mark the second stanza of this hymn.

Here it means that Jesus reigns supreme over all creation.

He ranks first. He's number one. See, he made it all, didn't he? He is not created. Verse 16 is clear. He is creator. All things through him. Just as we read in John chapter 1, through him all things were made. Without him nothing was made that has been made.

Trees and flowers, bears and bugs and mountains and rivers, galaxies. Spiritual beings. Spiritual beings.

[8 : 04] All of them spring to life by the word of his power. Because he brings them into existence. And don't miss, by the way, while Paul is pointing this out. We're going to come back to this later.

But they all exist for him. He is the goal of all creation. That is how high ranking the firstborn is.

In fact, verse 17, it's not just that once upon a time he was the source of all of creation. But to this very moment, he is the one who powerfully holds it all together.

Amazing. The bigness. The size of Jesus to be holding all of creation together. Some of you study space, right?

You know a lot more about it than I do, okay? Way more. And you're still learning more about it. And it is mind-boggling as you consider space how small the biggest, strongest of all of us feels in that vast space.

[9 : 13] And yet the space that we study and that we explore, Jesus, is even in this very moment, he is sustaining it.

He is holding it together. He is causing it not to explode. Wow. He's huge.

Remember, we've seen it when he walked among us, right? This is the very Jesus who speaks and the powerful storm is still, right? Who prays and five loaves of bread and two fish feed 5,000 plus people with multiple leftovers.

Who casts out a demon with a word. Who turns water into wine by merely asking. Who heals the worst diseases. Who even raises the dead.

God, every power, every part of creation bows the knee to King Jesus. He is supreme. He is in first place.

[10 : 20] Because he is, in fact, the one true God. The image of the invisible God. The one who makes the unseen seen.

The untouchable felt. The unknowable known. The idea here with that word is that it's not just a good copy. But it's something that participates in the very essence of the thing that it represents or reflects.

That kind of image. Somewhat like a sunbeam. That is actually sun in itself, right? As well as it's how we feel the sun.

The radiance of the glory of God, Hebrews says. The one who was with God and was God, John says.

This is God himself. In a way you can touch and know and see. Jesus is first place in creation because he supremely makes the God that we so desperately need to know.

[11 : 31] One we can and do know. How wonderful that is. As if that weren't enough cause for wonder and worship at the person of Jesus.

Stanza two then praises Jesus as first in the new creation. Verse 18. He is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning. The first born from the dead. See, God who once upon a time breathed life into humanity. Now when he finds them dead and separated from himself.

He breathes new life into people, doesn't he? He recreates them through the first born who rises from the dead. Jesus is supreme over the most powerful forces we know.

Conquering sin and death. Becoming the first one to rise. Never more to die, but to reign forever. God exalted him to the highest place.

[12 : 35] First place. First place. And gave him the name above every name. The name of King Jesus. Supreme one. First place.

Philippians 2 tells us. Jesus Christ is Lord. No one else. He is God in his fullness.

Jesus Christ is Lord. Not merely a piece or a part of God, but the true God himself. Rising victorious to return to his throne where he has always reigned.

And as he does that, in rising to his eternal throne, Jesus brings to life the new people of God who were far from God.

Jesus brings to life the new creation of God that was suffering under the curse of God. He reconciles all things, verse 20 says, to God by the blood of his cross.

[13 : 34] Because he's the firstborn from the dead. And many, many will follow. See, his resurrection life is what gives us hope, right? His resurrection body.

It heralds the renewal of all creation that is presently groaning or deteriorating. His resurrection power today fuels our life and mission.

It's his resurrection presence at God's right hand that secures our adoption, our acceptance into the family of God. As some of the many who live never more to die.

That's true of you. Never more to die. He will raise you with him forever with the Father. That is good stuff, church. This is why he is our head.

This is why we are his people that are part of the entire creation that was made for him. We exist for his glory so that he will receive the praise that he deserves.

[14 : 32] We were created by him and for him. So we worship him. Join me in that. Let's worship Jesus today.

And every day with full hearts. The only one who could give us life like that, right? Because he is the firstborn over all. The risen King Jesus is our head.

The one who started all of this for us. The world's great creator. The greatest re-creator. The firstborn over all. With the result.

The end of verse 18. That in everything he might be preeminent. Kids, preeminent is a fancy word for first place.

It's got that same word first in the Greek. It may even be used here in this hymn as a title for Jesus. Like the incomparable Christ.

[15 : 34] The supreme one. The first place gold medalist Jesus. Now just consider this with me for a second as we begin to ask how this changes our lives.

These gold medalists right here are great athletes, aren't they? World class gymnasts. But do you think that the five of them, is there any chance those women would get first place in basketball?

On a track relay maybe? Could the great Katie Ledecky win first place in weightlifting or tennis?

Is that likely? I think not. And yet Jesus is to be first place in everything.

In every stage of life, no matter how young or old you are. In every area of life, no matter what you have on your schedule or agenda this week.

[16 : 52] In every single life. What about in your life? Is that where he is? See for most of us, most of the time, what we experience in our lives is Jesus as one among many slices of life that we have to manage.

This right here is not the picture that the Bible gives us, to be clear. I don't want you to be confused. But you see Jesus here as one slice up there at the top of a pie.

And we have to manage all of these things. With nothing at the center, with nothing in first place, supremely orchestrating the heart and goal of our lives, what happens?

Our own instincts, our desires, our comfort, they become central and they direct us toward managing all these varied priorities, including Jesus, for our own purposes.

This is true for all of us. We all have a lot of things to manage. But I've been thinking, especially this week of young people, as you start a new school year.

[18:11] Will you look at this pie with me for a couple minutes? This is one I made a special for you. You can read some of them. You'll notice Jesus is still there. Up there, kind of top right. Life can be really challenging.

Can't it? I mean, just think, young people, all the relationships that you're managing, your family, your friends, all the classes at school, the different subjects you're trying to learn, what you look like, what you're going to wear, the hobbies you enjoy, or the college you're getting ready for, or the part-time job you have.

You got to check social media to stay in the loop. You got to make sure you figure out what skibbity means, because otherwise you might be left out. I don't know what it means, but some of you do.

And if you don't keep up with these things, you're going to be left out, right? That's an anxiety I would carry. And in the midst of all of that, you're trying to manage, and so much more, Jesus, too. Jesus is, like, really important to you, isn't he? But it's all just so much, so much to manage. You may even love Jesus so much that you think what many of us do, that what you really need to do is make that Jesus slice of the pie a bit larger, you know?

[19:47] Like, read a devotional, or rush to youth group as many times as possible, or join FCA, or something to make Jesus get just a little bit bigger, right?

I get it. I've done that. But see what happens as the days go by, and more and more people come in, and more and more decisions, and more and more responsibilities, they all get added into your life, and you start to feel pressure to squeeze it all in, and somehow make it all make sense, and figure out who you are in the midst of that.

And some of us hold that together longer than others, right? But eventually, at some point, it will just explode. It's just gonna fall apart.

Maybe you've felt it, maybe you're feeling that it could be there in just a few days. We feel this overwhelming confusion, like, where do I even start to pick up the pieces, and know how to put my life back together, and figure out what I'm supposed to do.

It feels like way too much. Kids, you know why it sometimes feels like way too much, and you start to feel pressure and anxiety, maybe even right now while I'm talking about it?

[21:06] Sometimes it feels like that because it is. It is too much. It is more than we can manage. And so, God is speaking to you today from His Word to tell you something that will help you not just with this school year, but with the rest of your life.

Jesus first in everything. Everything. How many things do you leave out of everything? Nothing. In everything. Don't start by trying to figure everything out. It won't work on your own. Start by turning to Jesus.

Seeing how supremely valuable He is, and then let Him direct all of those other things. See, it's not merely that Jesus needs to be a bigger slice of your life.

That will just build pressure for you, won't it? It's truly that He is first place in every aspect of your life.

[22:16] So slowly, maybe one piece at a time, you can start by asking, what does it look like for Jesus to be first place in my schoolwork?

That's a hard question. That'll take you a while to sort through. You can ask, what does it look like for Jesus to be first place in my friendships? What does it look like for Jesus to be first place in my money, my free time, with my phone?

But we need to ask all those questions because He is that worthy. He is that wonderful that He would be first place in everything.

Young people, if that seems tough to you, you should ask your parents how they're doing it, right? So that they can help you.

But when you do that, when you go to your parents, you need to be patient because if they're anything like the adults in my house, they'll need to admit that they don't live with Jesus in first place in every area of life either.

[23 : 22] They're still learning. They're trying to figure that out and all that that means in their life. But we need to do that together. And don't you long to?

Don't you long for that to be more of what your life is like? Wouldn't that give our lives purpose and direction and focus so that we're not overwhelmed all the time? But instead, we're living the way our Maker designed us to live, to flourish?

Y'all, it's hard to keep Jesus in first place for a lot of reasons. We have so many commitments that we may have to drop or hold back on some good things in order to make sure we don't miss the best thing.

Our lives are so full of so much that sometimes we have to simplify things or it will explode. Right? You've been there. It's hard to keep Jesus at the center because living with myself at the center is more natural.

It requires a lot less effort and a lot less intentionality. I'm used to it. I know how to live that way. But it's also hard for another reason I want to be honest about for a couple minutes.

[24 : 38] Jesus being first place in your life is both better and worse than the other things that take his place in first place.

In other words it's not always better in terms of how our lives feel. That's a lie. That's not what the Bible says. It does not just make everything easy all the time.

No. I wrestled with this this week. I wrestled with considering Jesus first multiple times even as I was preparing to preach about it.

You think I could have had a good week? An easy week of Jesus being first. It's all I was studying about. And he brought a neighbor into my path who was inconvenient for me to love and didn't fit my schedule and I needed to sit and listen and I didn't have time I thought.

I struggled with living with Jesus first when my car repair cost more than I expected. I hadn't planned to use the money that way. I had other plans for it. I struggled with it when I felt the decision Jesus wanted me to make as a parent was disappointing to my kids and I hate that feeling of disappointing them.

[25 : 56] If you consider Jesus first place in your friendships you may find yourself left out by a group you really care to be liked by because you're loving someone who is already lonely and left out the way Jesus would love them.

It doesn't feel good. If you decide to consider Jesus first in your job it may at times mean that you don't make quite as much money or get to buy that car or that dress if you consider Jesus first in your free time you may decide he wouldn't have you doing something that you enjoy doing and you sacrifice that in order to live with him.

You'll still have hard family arguments still get news of cancer you'll still make mistakes at work it does not magically fix everything okay but but having Jesus in first place planning your life around your relationship with him is better even when it seems or feels worse don't miss this as you spend more time with Jesus as his love for you transforms your life and your reality living with him first is best it is best because no matter who you're left out by you'll never be left alone by him or without community and his family you'll always have that because no matter what you can't afford your value is secure by the precious blood of Jesus Christ given for you because no matter what bad medical news you receive you're never without eternal hope and the promise of a resurrection body that will be given to you that will never break and will never hurt and will always last it's better even best to consider

Jesus first because no matter how challenging your marriage is you will be tasting the love of a perfect spouse who loves you unfaithfully and forever because no matter how badly you mess up at work or school you'll always have an identity that's established outside of anything you do or how well you perform you'll be safe and secure and valuable in Christ because no matter how many experiences you feel like you're missing out on in this life you'll never run out of time through eternity to explore every inch of God's glorious creation and enjoy life to the full with Him and with others you love forever see no matter whom you lose or what it costs you you'll have Jesus Himself the great King over all creation the powerful sustainer of the universe the supreme lover of your soul He will be yours always never ever letting you down

Southwood I'm inviting you again I am urging you to join me in the journey of walking with Jesus learning together what it means in our lives to have Him in first place in everything that's why we're still here this morning I don't want anyone to miss this in case you're wondering this is a journey that will not end I'm committed to keeping it before us keeping us on this journey in fact as a church it is

our first core commitment to being Christ centered by which we mean in every slice of life not just in our preaching or on Sundays but in our mission our shepherding our serving in all of life 24-7 365 we must do this together we need one another for this right we as your leaders are especially trying to keep this before us right now because we know how vital it is and because we know how hard it is because we're living it with you it's a struggle for us too so especially be listening in the days and weeks ahead be talking together about how we consider Jesus first lots of ways to have this on your radar as we go back to the gospel of John week in and week out and watch and listen to Jesus hear his final passionate instructions to us what it looks like to live in relationship with him as we gather in grace groups to process together what we're learning and how this transforms our lives it's this first place

[31 : 12] Jesus that is what will be training our grace group leaders to help you walk in together as we gather with the parents of kids and youth and we're going to talk about the very same thing how we model Christ centered living and shape our kids toward Christ centered living together Jesus first in parenting in work in friendship in time in money in marriage there's a lot to talk about don't sit on the sidelines of this journey don't think Jesus is okay with the bronze medal hey he's a part of my life that's all he ever wanted don't think you're the gold medalist who will eventually sort your own life out it's just really busy right now but you'll eventually figure it out no no come back and be a part of this now Jesus first one last word of encouragement for us in this this is especially for those who are like me who feel convicted when you hear this maybe like me it's because you've heard this your whole life and you're you're kind of cynical about it at this point you're a little skeptical you're like yeah I mean

I've believed that since I was a kid but I don't feel like it's ever kind of taken hold of me I don't feel like it's ever made the difference that it was supposed to and so I don't know what's going to be different this time I keep failing to live the way that I should that's actually a good thing to feel because there's there's hope right there first there's bad news you're likely to fail again probably this afternoon if I had to guess at considering Jesus first in everything in your life but there's really good news and I want this to inspire your heart in a new way and in fresh relationship with Jesus Jesus considered us first for all the times that we didn't consider him first all of them look at what follows this glorious Christ hymn it ends by saying

Jesus' cross reconciles everything in the world to God and as for you you who were once alienated from God the Father who were hostile to him in your mind who were doing evil deeds even when you were doing the most evil deed possible what's that removing God from the center the throne of your heart and your life that's the first commandment right that we confessed earlier in the service we've failed to obey even then Jesus has reconciled you by his death so that he presents you holy and blameless and above reproach to his Father who has become now and forever your Father what amazing grace that Jesus would do that instead of his own comfort Jesus considered us first and what we would need and how much he means to us so that we now by his very spirit given to us can join in the journey the exciting costly hard fulfilling journey of considering him first place in everything what a gracious

Savior let's ask for his help Jesus we renew even now our commitment to relationship with you before anything else oh Holy Spirit we ask for your help because our hearts are so prone to wander and even when when our hearts come to life and our spirits are willing you know our flesh is weak so help us we pray that we would not just give lip service to Jesus that we would not just grow his slice of the pie but that we would experience what it means that he would be preeminent in everything for his glory and for our good we ask it in his name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org