

July 1, 2007 Col. 1:15-23 (Communion Sunday)

Pastor Brad Smith

**Title: Find the Best, Follow Instructions**

**The sermon in a sentence:** Never move from your hope in Jesus, the One who is supreme over everything.

**Why I am preaching it:** To give the congregation an exalted view of Jesus Christ, and to encourage them to keep on in their faith and hope.

Anyone who has a rare, life-threatening illness must do two things, and only two things, to be healed: First they must find the very best help available, and then they must follow the counsel of the medical team that is treating them. Just two things: Find the best help available; follow instructions.

Many of you remember when our minister of music, Mark Kuraya, needed complicated and delicate brain surgery. Mark, his family, and the whole congregation were thrilled when he was able to be operated on by a neurosurgeon who was internationally known for treating his exact condition. He was the best. Most people when faced with a major illness will do all they can to seek out the top person in the field.

But of course even if they get the top medical team, they will be cured only if they follow instructions. There are people who seek out the best specialists, and then ignore their counsel. They are more attracted to the exotic. They will see an article about an “ancient Aztec cure for cancer” and throw out all the sound medical advice of their doctors. You have probably seen the ads for books that promise such things as a “secret formula that allows you to eat anything you want and still control diabetes.” There is something in us that is drawn to secret remedies that most people don’t know about—especially if they promise a quick and easy cure. There are endless sad stories of people who have lost their health or even their lives because they exchanged the best for the easy and exotic quick fix.

The church at Colosse was in danger of a similar sad end. They had begun well by trusting in Jesus, the Lord of all. There never was nor ever will be anyone comparable. But now some new teachers were coming in with exotic views that tempted and confused the Colossian Christians. These teachers had knowledge that supposedly was more advanced than the Gospel as taught by Paul that was brought to Colosse by Epaphras. Maybe Jesus

wasn't all that they had been led to believe that he was, said these teachers. Maybe something more was needed.

Although Paul had never met most of the Colossians, he loved them and wanted to protect them from the danger of this teaching. In verses 15-20 he reminded them of the greatness, the supremacy of Jesus Christ, and in verses 21-23 he reminded them of the instructions they needed to follow to remain in the light and not fall back into the darkness. That is what we will look at today in this passage: The greatness of Jesus, and what we need to do in light of his greatness.

Let's take a look first at who Jesus is, and at the supposedly new and improved teaching that sought to diminish him. I know I have mentioned before that banks train their tellers to recognize counterfeit bills by looking closely at real bills. The better you know the real thing, the more easily you can spot a fake. Paul is reminding the Colossians of who the real Jesus is, so they can spot any teaching that tries to make him less. Listen again to 1:15-20. Listen for the seven occurrences of the word "all" and also the occurrence of "everything," which means pretty much the same thing. [Read the verses.] Do you get the sense of the power, the majesty, the supremacy of Jesus Christ?

When we see what Paul emphasized, we get some hints at the content of the false teaching that was beginning to circulate. "For in him all things were created, things in heaven and things on earth...all things were created by him and for him." Perhaps they were teaching that Jesus was created by God, rather than being the Creator of everything, working together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. If Jesus is simply part of creation, then his love for us and his death on the cross will not be sufficient to bring us into relationship with God our Creator. The false teaching that Jesus was less than God became known as Arianism, and almost destroyed the church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The Jehovah's Witnesses picked it up and teach it today.

It is also taught in a different form in a number of Protestant seminaries. It usually goes something like this: Jesus was a wonderful teacher and a wonderful example of love, who died tragically on a Roman cross. He never claimed to be anything more than a teacher. But in later years the church added stories and legends that made the simple carpenter from Nazareth into God. Versions of that view are taught or implied from time to time in news magazine articles, TV specials, and books and movies such as the DaVinci

Code. Don't be surprised when they appear—they have popped up for centuries—but don't believe them, either.

You simply cannot get that teaching from the Scriptures. Paul had met personally on various occasions with Peter, who had known Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, and with James, the brother of Jesus. He wrote Colossians within the lifetime of people who had seen and heard and talked with Jesus personally. Paul knew the life story of Jesus. Yet he says that the same Jesus Christ whose blood was shed on the cross was also the one through whom all things were created.

Paul wrote that Jesus created all things, "...whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities." These words referred to the world of spirits. Perhaps the false teachers said that these spirits had created Jesus. Or maybe they said that you needed to appease these spirits in order to reach God.

There are parts of the world today where people live in fear of the spirit world. For such people, the Good News of Jesus draws them not only because Jesus offers forgiveness of sins, but also because he has authority over all spiritual reality as well as physical reality.

I recently found out that in Hawai'i when you sell your house, you must inform the buyer if anyone has died there. I imagine that is because some people fear that the spirit of the dead person will harass them. Just a week or two ago I was asked to bless a home because the occupant was afraid of spirits. I went, but it really was not necessary for a pastor to go. Jesus is the supreme power, and any follower of Jesus can claim his protection from spiritual harm.

"He is the head of the body, the church." The head sets the course for the rest of the body. And a body has only one head. Everybody would agree in theory that Christ is the head of the church, but it does not always work out that way in practice. One of the characteristics of cult leaders is that they want their followers to listen only to them. They discourage their followers from considering any other Christian teaching.

Even among genuine Christians there are some pastor-centered churches, where any questioning of the pastor's authority is considered disobedience to God. On the other extreme, when a new pastor begins serving in a church, he or she sometimes discovers that a few individuals or families consider the

church to be theirs. Nothing can occur without their approval. I heard of a church where one powerful man drove out several pastors over the years. The church suffered, but nobody seemed able to stand up to him. Jesus is the head of the body, the church. Pastors, elders, all members of the church need to discern where Jesus, the head of the church, is taking the congregation.

So there we have Jesus Christ, creator of all things visible and invisible, physical and spiritual, head of creation and also head of the new creation, his church.

In verses 21-23, Paul highlights the benefits that Jesus has showered upon the Colossians. They were no longer enemies of God, but reconciled to him. They would be presented to God without blemish or accusation. God would not accuse them, and they could safely ignore the accusations of others and even any self-accusation they may have suffered from. But there was a condition for enjoying these benefits. They had to "...continue in the faith, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel."

Of course the same benefits that were lavished upon Christians in the first century are available to us as well. We are welcomed into God's family. Because of the saving work of Jesus, we, too, will never be accused by God, and can ignore the accusations of others and of ourselves. But just as we receive the same benefits, so also the same condition holds true for us—to continue in the faith, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.

Continue in the faith. What does that mean, and how can we do it? When we realize that faith in God is a relationship of trust in God, I think the answer becomes clear. Relationships, whether with God or with other people, operate by the same principles.

Think of family relationships. They flourish in the same way today that they have ever since families began. Families spend time together. They talk things through. They celebrate each other's birthdays, have family reunions, and help each other out in time of need. They fight with each other and drive each other crazy, but they know that they will work it out because they are family.

Sadly, some families drift apart. It is never our intention to drift apart. It's just that we spend so much time with other things, maybe worthy things, that we can hardly remember when we last had unhurried time with our spouse.

We don't really know what our kids or our brothers and sisters are thinking because somehow we don't provide opportunities where they can let us know. We don't make it to family reunions or special family events any more, or maybe we just make an appearance and leave. We can't point to one moment when we stopped relating like a family. It was a matter of many small decisions.

The same is true in our relationship Jesus Christ, the one who created us, saves us, and holds us together individually and as a church family. How do we nurture that relationship? How do we continue in the faith? In the same way that the Colossians must have done so. Prayer. Regular study of the Bible. Spending time over meals together, including the Lord's Supper that we just celebrated. Driving each other crazy but being committed to work it out because we all belong to the Lord Jesus. Little daily decisions of obedience. That's what it means to continue in the faith.

Let me lead us in a few moments of prayer. [First focusing on the supremacy of Christ and releasing our worries and fears to him; second, committing to one step to nurture our relationship with Jesus and with his family.]