

Disciples Give Ultimate Allegiance to Christ

November 24, 2019

Theme: Make Christ the center of everything.

Scripture: Colossians 1: 10-20

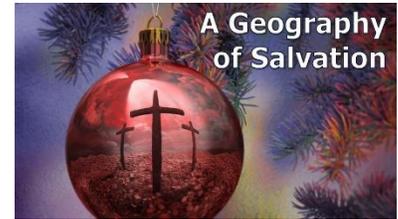
¹⁰ Lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. ¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is 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. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.



Today we close out our "What Disciples Do" sermon series. It has been eleven weeks of hearing how we are called to live out our faith as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Next week we will begin our Advent sermon series.

It is called "A Geography of Salvation". In this series we will take two intertwined journeys. One journey will walk the physical and spiritual roads with the various people who were a part of the story of the birth of



Christ. We will begin with Isaiah and conclude with the arrival of Jesus. The other journey will be along the road with the familiar Advent themes of love, hope, peace, and joy. This journey will have a decidedly John Wesleyan flavor to it. You can add depth to this sermon series by choosing to be involved in an Advent study here at church or by reading the book or daily devotional available for purchase. Today we conclude our current series with a



dive into how "Disciples Give Their Ultimate Allegiance to Christ". Pause for just a few seconds with me and consider what this statement means to you. Today we look at the heart of what it means to be a disciple: following Jesus. To follow – to speak like, to act like, to love God like, to love others like Jesus. As we begin today, let us offer a word of prayer...

As Americans we naturally value independence and self-sufficiency. American culture teaches these things. We like to be in control of our lives and the choices we make. If we encounter a problem, we tend to think that we can solve it. If we are not quite achieving the success we desire, the solution is simply to work harder. This mindset can make it difficult to give our allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Let's take a moment to contrast this American ideal with the passage we encounter today in Colossians 1. If you are not open to this passage,

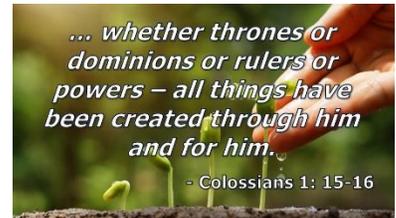
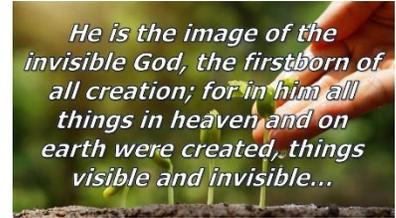
please turn to it in your Bible or in a pew Bible. We will be starting on verse ten. The first five verses, ten through fourteen, are an encouragement for both the Colossians and for us as believers and followers of Jesus Christ.

Paul begins in verse ten. Here he encourages us to *"lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God"*. To live a life worthy of Jesus' example – that is a challenge in today's culture. To bear fruit in every good work – an equal challenge in an age of thinking of self first and foremost. To do these two things, to live a life worthy of Christ and to bear fruit in every good work, we must constantly be delving into our faith and investing in its growth. Paul knows that we cannot do this by the sheer power of self-will. So Paul continues in verse eleven, asking that we be *"made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power"*. Paul is praying that the power of Christ resides in and on us. Why? So that *"we may be prepared to endure everything with patience"*. Not so that we can conquer anything the world brings at us. So that we can endure with patience. So that we can allow God's plan to be worked out in God's time. Why do we need to choose to trust in God? It is right there in verse twelve: *"to share in the inheritance of the saints of light"*. To be able to live this earthly life in the light of Christ. This opening stanza closes with a powerful reminder: *"he has rescued us from the power of darkness"*. Because of Christ, we are no longer slaves to sin and death – the powers of darkness. Instead, we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins. Through this we are able to be made new again each day as we strive to walk as children of the light.

The second section, verses fifteen through twenty, paints a wonderful image of who Jesus Christ is. Read verses fifteen and sixteen with me. The words will be on the screens:

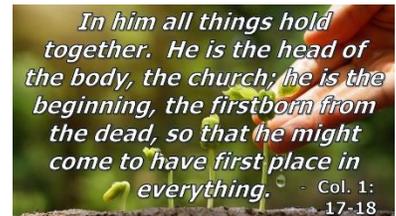
He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible...

... whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him.



This is powerful, right? Firstborn of all creation – he who was and is and is to come. He created all things – all things – for his purposes. All things. You and me and everyone else. Let's continue along, starting part way through verse seventeen. Again, please read with me:

In him all things hold together. He is 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.



Jesus holds everything together. Christ is supreme. Hear it again: Jesus holds all things together. Jesus is the head or leader of the church. He is the first one to conquer the power of death, the first one to rise, opening our path to love, hope, peace, and joy in this life and to eternal life. All this, all this, so that Christ "*might come to have first place in everything*". Not first place in some things. First place in everything. Again, as we did earlier, pause and consider what this last line means: "*first place in everything*".



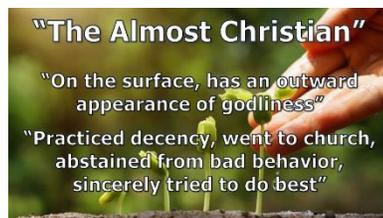
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First place in everything. That is an interesting thought, isn't it? On July 25, 1741, John Wesley gave a sermon at St. Mary's Church called "The Almost Christian". In this sermon Wesley offered

some observations about what it might mean to almost be a Christian. From observing those in many of the churches that he pastored and frequented, John Wesley came up with this hypothetical person who was not quite a Christian. He observed that an "almost Christian" was a person who, *"on the surface, has an outward appearance of godliness"*. They look good to



the outsider. This person would practice what Wesley termed "heathen honesty". He said such a person would not be unjust, would not take away their neighbor's goods, would not oppress the poor, would not cheat or defraud another. Such a person would not lie, would not slander, would not falsely accuse another. They would both give and expect a certain level of love and assistance from others. For example, they would feed the poor if they had food to spare. An "almost Christian" would have a form of godliness. As such, they would not do anything that the gospel forbids. This person would not take the Lord's name in vane and would avoid adultery, fornication, and uncleanness. In short, they looked godly because, on first glance, they did all the "right" things.



Out in the world the "Almost Christian" practiced decency, went to church, abstained from bad behavior, sincerely tried to do their best. In his sermon, Wesley paused and asked the question – is it possible to do all

this and be an "almost Christian"? Hear his honest confession as he looked deeply into his own heart.

I did go thus far for many years, as many of this place can testify; using diligence to eschew all evil, and to have a conscience void of offence; redeeming the time; buying up every opportunity of doing all good to all men; constantly and carefully using all the public and all the private means of grace; endeavoring after a steady seriousness of behavior, at all times, and in all places; and, God is my record, before whom I stand, doing all this in sincerity; having a real design to serve God; a hearty desire to do his will in all things; to please him who had called me to "fight the good fight," and to "lay hold of eternal life." Yet my own conscience beareth me witness in the Holy Ghost, that all this time I was but almost a Christian.

John Wesley lived this "almost Christian" life for many years. I can relate to this. Probably like many of you, I talked the talk but did not walk the walk. I was an almost Christian for a long time. In some ways, maybe I still am.

In his sermon Wesley does go on to describe what it means to be an "altogether Christian". Wesley provides three marks. The first mark is having the love of God in one's heart. This means to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength. Accordingly, for Wesley, this meant that one who has the love of God in their heart has crucified the "desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye" and is dead to pride of every kind. The second mark is being filled with a love of neighbor. For Wesley, this love was "long suffering and kind". It was a love that sought to be the servant of all.



It was a love that lived out Paul's words in 1st Corinthians 13, a love that *"bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"*. The third mark was to possess a saving faith - the unshakable belief that through faith in Christ alone, one receives eternal life. Wesley quoted from John 5:24, which reads, *"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life"*. For John Wesley, the altogether Christian lived a life that embodied these three marks. The love of God and neighbor was shed abroad in all areas of life. Wesley concluded his sermon with these words: *"May we all thus experience what it is to be, not almost only; but altogether Christians; being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus; knowing we have peace with God through Jesus Christ; rejoicing in hope of the glory of God; and having the love of God shed abroad in our hearts"*.



Perhaps Wesley's words are a bit abstract for some of us here today. If so, allow me to close with this true story that drives home these three marks of an altogether Christian. This true story connects into the also true story that I shared last week about the single mother and her struggles. If you recall, the point of sharing her story was to make us all aware of the needs and the challenges that are daily realities for some in our community. I share this week's true story to help us begin to see how Jesus calls us to respond to the least and the lost, to the broken and marginalized. Jim Cymbala preaches at a church in the slums of New York. He tells the following story:

It was Easter Sunday and I was so tired at the end of the day that I just went to the edge of the platform, pulled down my tie and sat down and draped my feet over the edge. It was a wonderful service with many people coming forward. The counselors were talking with these people.

As I was sitting there, I looked up the middle aisle, and there in about the third row was a man who looked about fifty, disheveled, filthy. He looked up at me rather sheepishly, as if saying, "Could I talk to you?"

We have homeless people coming in all the time, asking for money or whatever. So, as I sat there, I said to myself, though I am ashamed of it, "What a way to end a Sunday. I've had such a good time, preaching and ministering, and here's a fellow probably wanting some money for more wine."

He walked up. When he got within about five feet of me, I smelled a horrible smell like I'd never smelled in my life. It was so awful that when he got close, I would inhale by looking away, and then I'd talk to him, and then look away to inhale, because I couldn't inhale facing him. I asked him, "What's your name?"

"David."... "How long have you been on the street?"... "Six years."

"How old are you?"... "Thirty-two." He looked fifty - hair matted; front teeth missing; wino; eyes slightly glazed.

"Where did you sleep last night, David?"... "Abandoned truck."

I keep in my back pocket a money clip that also holds some credit cards. I fumbled to pick one out thinking; I'll give him some money. I won't even get a volunteer. They are all busy talking with others. Usually we don't give money to people. We take them to get something to eat.

I took the money out. David pushed his finger in front of me. He said, "I don't want your money. I want this Jesus, the One you were talking about, because I'm not going to make it. I'm going to die on the street."

I completely forgot about David, and I started to weep for myself. I was going to give a couple of dollars to someone God had sent to me. See how easy it is? I could make the excuse I was tired. There is no excuse. I was not seeing him the way God sees him. I was not feeling what God feels.

But oh, did that change! David just stood there. He didn't know what was happening. I pleaded with God, "God, forgive me! Forgive me! Please forgive me. I am so sorry to represent You this way. I'm so sorry. Here I am with my message and my points, and you send somebody, and I am not ready for it. Oh, God!"

Something came over me. Suddenly I started to weep deeper, and David began to weep. He fell against my chest as I was sitting there. He fell against my white shirt and tie, and I put my arms around him, and there we wept on each other. The smell of his person became a beautiful aroma. Here is what I thought the Lord made real to me: If you don't love this smell, I can't use you, because this is why I called you where you are. This is what you are about. You are about this smell.

Christ changed David's life. He started memorizing portions of Scripture that were incredible. We got him a place to live. We hired him in the church to do maintenance, and we got his teeth fixed. He was a handsome man when he came out of the hospital. They detoxed him in six days. He spent that Thanksgiving at my house. He also spent Christmas at my house.

When we were exchanging presents, he pulled out a little thing and he said, "This is for you." It was a little white hanky. It was the only thing he could afford.

A year later David got up and talked about his conversion to Christ. The minute he took the mic and began to speak, I said, "The man is a preacher." This past Easter we ordained David. He is an associate minister of a church over in New Jersey. And I was so close to saying, "Here, take this money; I'm a busy preacher." We can get so full of ourselves.

Thank God that Jim allowed the love of God to be in him and to flow through him and out into David's heart. Thank God that Jim allowed the love of neighbor to permeate him and move him past the initial stereotyping and appearance and smell of this homeless man. Thank God that the saving message of the gospel pierced David's heart and reminded Jim of that same saving grace that lived in his heart. This is the story of two men who gave their ultimate allegiance to Christ. In the end, this is the story of two altogether Christians. As we prepare to enter the Advent season, I ask: are you an almost Christian or are you an altogether Christian?

Whether you are an almost Christian or an altogether Christian, I invite you to join us the next five weeks as we walk the road to the Christ that we will find in the manger this Advent season. As we began today, we heard the call to allow Christ to have first place in all things. Using John Wesley's "Almost Christian" sermon we looked at the marks of a follower of Jesus Christ. They were: love God, love neighbor, and possess a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Next week we begin to journey through a geography of salvation. As we move along that road, we will find that the road ends with the gift of salvation – found in following the Lord and Savior of the world – Jesus Christ. For some this journey might be an introduction and for others it will be a great reminder of why we follow Jesus. One and all, please join us each week as we journey to the manger, passing by the signposts of love, hope, peace, and joy as we study and grow together this Advent season. Let us pray...

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. In what new ways can loving God and neighbor draw you closer to being an “altogether Christian”?
- 2) Pray. Where is Christ not first in your life? Pray for the courage and power to make Christ first in everything.
- 3) Serve. Who is like the homeless David in your life? How could investing in their life lead them to know Christ as Lord and Savior?