

Jesus: Our Substitute

Colossians 2:13-15

¹³ *And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,* ¹⁴ *by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.* ¹⁵ *He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (ESV)*

I've been a Christian now for 25 years, maybe, and in that time I've been a member of several accountability groups, some more effective than others. And yet, one thing that I've noticed in every accountability group setting, and even in a church setting, is one of the most dangerous questions that's ever asked. You want to know what that question is? "How committed are you to Jesus?"

Some people would say that the whole point of accountability is to keep me accountable for my commitment to Jesus. So, you sit down with a group of guys and ask, "How committed to Jesus are you this week?" In my experience, there are only two possible answers. The first possible response is you lie. Right? "I'm doing fine." The second possible response possible is, "I've failed." And so everyone says, "OK, let's move on." I mean it goes nowhere.

Now let me tell you what is very appropriate. The most fruitful question I've seen asked in that kind of setting is just this: "How committed is Jesus to you?" Go around the next time you have a small group and ask that question. My guess is that people will not be able to stop talking.

As we've been studying the book of Colossians, what Paul has been basically saying (I've given you this a number of different ways), he's saying about people who are going to come into the church. He's preempting people. There are not any big problems. He's warning them about what's going to happen and what happens to every church. Basically he's saying people are going to come into the church, Colossians, and ask you, "How committed are you to Jesus?" The sort-of Jewish arm would say, "If you're really committed you're not only going to trust him, but you are going to be circumcised. Not only are you going to be circumcised, but you are going to obey all the festival days and you're going to do all these things." On the other hand some people might come in and say, "If you are really committed you'll do what ever it takes to communicate with people outside. If you are really committed, you'll not only be committed to Jesus, but everyone else under him. All the angels and demons you'll be worried about and cower to them." What Paul has been saying is that when someone comes in and says to you, "How committed are you to Jesus? Are you circumcising? How committed are you? Are you bowing down to the elemental spirits?" You tell them, "You're asking the wrong question." The real question is, "How committed is Jesus to me?" As we've looked at this book of Colossians, what Paul has been saying over and over again to the Colossians, is "Let me show you how committed Jesus is to you." Let me show you.

And by the way, remember I told you when I started this series my goal during the summer was to get through all four chapters of Colossians? We're going to make it through two. It's a confession. See, I have nothing to hide right now.

So he's been telling them how Jesus is to them. If you remember the language I used (what you often see in Paul's), is the indicative versus the imperative or the imperative versus the indicative. Remember, an imperative is a command, basically; to do something or not to do something. The indicative is more passive, it's who you are or what's been done for you. What you see in Paul over and over again, and you see it throughout the whole Bible really, is the indicative (who you are) always comes before the command (what you should do). Even as we've looked at this book, and the verse we looked at today actually goes all the way back to verse eight of this chapter, where Paul gave them a command, an imperative. Remember what that command was? I'll read it to you. He says,

⁸ *See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. (ESV)*

So, Paul has given them an imperative. "See to it that no one takes you captive either to a human tradition or to the elemental spirits of the world." In other words, he's covering both arms, if you will, of the insiders and outsiders. You have the Jewish teachers who might come in and try to bind them to human tradition, and you have the other teachers to who might come in and try to bind them to some other worldview or philosophy. Paul says, "Let no one take you captive." Then he goes on to explain the indicative: here's why you shouldn't, here's why you don't need to. And remember last week we talked about circumcision. People come and say, "Hey, if you want to be a good Christian, you've got to be circumcised." And you know if you think about it that's not really a good outreach technique when you're trying to reach adult Gentiles in the ancient near East. And Paul says your response to that is, "I have been circumcised having been baptized in Christ." So you equated circumcision with baptism. And then he went on to basically say how in Christ, we don't need to fear the elemental spirits of the world or angels or demons or anything else because we're the "alpha dogs" of creation. Because all the fullness of the deity dwells in Jesus, Jesus dwells in you, and Jesus is over all things. And so you have no reason to fear all those things around in the spirit world or the demons or anything like that. The beautiful thing when you start reading Paul, what's great, is that he could have stopped there and made his point. And yet once Paul gets talking about Jesus and he gets on a roll it's like he can't stop. So today he's continuing on that same roll. Remember, the last thing he talked about were the elemental spirits of the world kind of thing. And today, basically, he's going to keep going.

We're going to look at three things this morning. God does three actions that Paul tells the Colossians that God did for them. The first one: "God made you alive." Number two: "God made you forgiven." Number three: "God made you victorious." You don't hear that a lot in Presbyterian churches. But he says, "God made you victorious." Now, one thing I want you to note, of all those points you've probably noticed, who did all the work in all those three things? God. God made you alive, he made you forgiven, and he made you victorious. So let's look at the first point: God made you alive. In verse 13, just the first part, says,

¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him . . . (ESV)

One of the things that's often overlooked and yet the Bible teaches it over and over again is that by nature all of us are dead, spiritually speaking. We're dead. It started in the Garden of Eden. Remember in the Garden of Eden God created Adam and Eve and said, "You may eat from the whole garden except there's one tree and you shall not eat of it. That's the tree of knowledge of good and evil. For on the day you do, surely you will die." Skeptics will say, "They ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and they didn't die, so the Bible can't be true." It's because they don't understand death from a Biblical perspective. You see, death from a Biblical perspective entails separation. What it means to be dead is to be utterly separated and helpless to fix that separation yourself. Sin separates us from God. The Bible says over and over, "We are dead."

Now, here's the million dollar question, "What can a dead person do to help him or herself?" How much power does a dead person have to resuscitate him or herself? You see the only thing that can help a dead person is resuscitation and nothing else. Have you ever seen a dead person and tried to shout it back into life? WAKE UP! You can shout until you're blue in the face and it'll never happen. Have you ever begged a dead person to come back? I have. It doesn't work. The only thing that can make something that is dead come to life is something that has the ability to make it come alive. And what Paul says about us is that, "You were dead in your trespasses and sins. But God made you alive." You hear that every week, by the way, from me. How do I open the worship service? "God always initiates with sinners." The reason I say that is because God has to initiate because sinners can't initiate if they're dead. Dead people are just dead. Spiritually speaking, Paul says that's where we are. The whole Bible says that. He said the bad news is that "you were dead." The good news is that "but God made you alive. He opened your eyes to this thing called the gospel. Paul's telling that this is the Good News. This is what they need not fear because when you were dead God came and made you alive. Not only did He make you alive, but He forgave your sins. You see, He made you alive, but being alive isn't any good unless you are now forgiven. And, that's where Paul goes next. He says, "He made you alive having forgiven your sins." Look at the next point at the end of verse thirteen, he says:

¹³ . . . God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (ESV)

A few weeks ago I found a program on my web browser called "Stumble Upon." Some of you may know about this. Basically it's just a button that goes on your web browser and you enter preferences for things you're interested in. I have in mine, "Christianity," "Woodworking," "Arts," that kind of thing. I would never do this, but say you're on a really boring conference call in your office and the phone's on mute. And you hit the "Stumble Button," and what it does is randomly generates sites from the Internet that are along your lines of interest. A few weeks ago I was in my office, I forgot what it was that had me "Stumbling." I'm not going to give you the website's name, I'd probably get in trouble if I did, but let's just call it "forgiveness.com." That's not it, but this is the absolutely true. You go to the website, you make a free account, and you use the site to confess your sins. You log-on just like a blog, and you confess your sins, whatever you wanted to confess. Now, here's where it gets interesting. You confess your sins, you hit submit and then it's posted and everyone else who's now a member of the site gets to read it and then they all vote on whether that sins was forgivable or not. Pretty wild! I was randomly looking around site and I was so fascinated. The reason I won't give you the site because some what people confess I wouldn't want my sheep to see, but I'm looking around and the best that I ever saw anyone get was a 94. And that was for things like parking tickets or speeding. If you did anything else, you were lucky to get above a 70. And if you did something really salacious and you know, icky, you're in the 30's, maybe. I was sitting there fascinated, and thought, "Why?" On your best day you think you're going to get 94% forgiveness, and how good is 94 when the curve-breaking score is 100? It's not good at all. And yet, people are looking for it apparently, and yet here's the beauty in the glory of the Gospel: you confess your sins to Jesus, you give them to him and you get 100% forgiveness. You always get 100%. You don't have to worry about it. You don't throw it out there and say, "This sin is probably going to get a 40." It's always 100. Now the question is, "Why?" Why is it always 100? It's because someone whose score was 100% gave himself up for you and me. Let me read to you that verse again. After he says "He made us alive," he says:

¹³ . . . *having forgiven us all our trespasses, (and that word in Greek means "ALL")* ¹⁴ *by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (ESV)*

There's debate over what this language is. Was it "record of debt" or is it "the demands of the law." The word Paul uses when he talks about "having canceled the record of debt written against us," is "handwriting" in Greek. In other words, it's like an IOU. It's like when you're going to sign for a mortgage, and then you write, and there's a lot of fine print that you really don't bother reading. You're signing for this mortgage, and he said this handwriting is against you. It accuses you. Whether it's the law, the Ten Commandments that we confessed at the beginning of the service, or whether it's your own low standard of morality. Even if you're not a Christian and you say whatever your standard of morality is, if you're honest you don't even meet your own low standards. Paul says, "Jesus has come, having forgiven us, having canceled the handwriting that was against us." The word here has to do with just blotting out. What Paul does here, is he talks about Jesus, who has definitely dealt with our sin. It's literally as if you took an eraser and gotten rid of it. All of your sins are taken away, all of them, every bit of them because they're placed on the person of Jesus. But then Paul takes it one more step. Notice what he says at the last part of that verse. He says:

¹⁴ *(He canceled) the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (ESV)*

One translation says, "This he took away having nailed it to the cross." Different people speculate, and I tend to agree with them, that the language here is the same language of the Latin term "titulus." And what that was, was when someone would be crucified by the Romans, they would hang a sign over their head with the accusation. Sound familiar? When Jesus was crucified, they mocked him by hanging a sign over His head. They were "accusing him" of being the King of the Jews. The men on either side of him had signs as well, but there's probably said things like "Thief," "Liar," "Rapist," all these kinds of things. What Paul is doing is he works us through this, he's showing how the Gospel turns the world on its head. He's saying, "When Jesus went to the cross and they nailed that "titulus" above His head that said "King of the Jews," that was not the only thing that was nailed up there." You see, from the human perspective, for those who are mocking him, they looked up and it said "King of the Jews." When God looked at the cross, what He saw nailed above Jesus' head were the words "Tommy Allen." Your name is included there, too. All of your sins, Paul says, were taken and they were nailed to the cross. Jesus was the criminal on your behalf. He was accused, and when Jesus was accused and they nailed

your sins and the accusations against you on His head, when He died your sin was paid for—period. So it's taken away. What's interesting is not that you're forgiven, but you're now victorious because he says, "He made you alive; He made you forgiven; He made you victorious." Notice what happens here at the end. Paul says:

¹⁵ *He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (ESV)*

The language here at the end has to do with the Roman generals, who would go and conquer some place, they would pillage it, and then when they would come back to Rome or any other city for that matter, they would have behind their chariot all the leaders of those they had vanquished. And the people who they had vanquished would be put to public disgrace, having being dragged behind the ruler's chariot. And notice how Paul has turned the whole world on its head there. Because two groups of people, the same two groups that Paul is warning the Colossians about, were the ones who thought they won. They thought they were crucifying Jesus, the Lord of Glory. You have the Jewish leadership and you have the secular government, the Romans. They crucified Jesus and mocked him and killed him, and they thought in doing so they had triumphed over him. What God says happened is that as they were mocking Jesus and crucifying him and killing him, they were actually killing themselves. In their defeat of Jesus, they actually sealed their own defeat. That, in the death of Jesus is the victory for all those who He would save. Because of that, they can't touch you anymore. They can't accuse you. Notice the language. Paul says, "They were disarmed." Whether he's referring here to the devil or even your own conscious—they are disarmed by the cross.

In fact, what Paul is almost getting at is the whole issue of blackmail. Where maybe the devil was whispering in your ear, or your own conscious was whispering in your ear, "If people knew exactly who you were (whistle) you wouldn't be the Pastor any more. If they knew who you were you wouldn't be an elder, you wouldn't be able to do this or that." What's the best way to deal with a blackmailer? It's to beat him to the punch. It's to 'fess up. If someone's blackmailing you for embezzlement or something, the easiest way to defeat the blackmailer is to 'fess up yourself because then they have no power over you. What Paul is saying here is when Jesus went to the cross and took away all of your sins, no one can blackmail you anymore. So when people come and say, "Tommy you're the worst sinner I've ever met in my life." You can say, "Bingo. I knew that, and you haven't even gotten close, and you have no power over me any more because you don't rule me. That's been taken away." And there's one interesting thing, and I'll close on this because I've heard some about this lately. What Paul is talking about here, he starts a transition from "elemental spirits" to "rulers and authorities." It's the same language you'd use for secular rulers and authorities. The question is, "Is Jesus Lord over even secular governments and secular authorities?" The answer the Bible would give is ultimately, "Yes." Why am I telling you that? Remember the whole point of this book of Colossians is Paul telling us over and over again, "Here's how committed Jesus is to you, and here's where all your security is, here's where all your hope is."

This time of year, about every four years or so, I start to get e-mails and letters in my mailbox from people, well intentioned, who say "When are you going to preach about who we should vote for?" Or, "When are you going to tell us what a Godly candidate looks like." Or, "How I should vote in this election and which candidate is this and that and the other thing." I'm going to be honest with you: You will probably never hear me come anywhere close to preaching about anything like that, ever. And here's the reason why. It's because your hope is not in a political candidate. Your hope is in Jesus. For me to even imply that your hope lays in one political party or another would for me to go contrary to my calling. Your hope is in one place. It's in Jesus. Depending on which political end of the spectrum you're on, the other candidate is basically the worst possible thing that could ever happen, correct? And yet here's beauty of it, if you look throughout the world, places like China, places with the worst governments, that's where the Gospel is growing faster than ever. My point is the more your hope is not vested in other things, the more the Gospel will grow in you and through you and around you. So think about that.