

The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

Colossians 1-4

“Why is this Core?”

Mark Vroegop

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 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. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 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. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col 1:15-20)

A few years ago I took up running. Now you need to know that I was one of those guys who absolutely hated running unless it was from something scary or included dribbling a soccer or basketball. However, I hated something even more: having to buy new suits. You see I hit the 35 year-old mark, my metabolism slowed, and my suits were shrinking. So I started running, and I was introduced to the fascinating sub-culture of runners.

My wife, who is an avid runner, helped me purchase my first real running shoes, helped me understand various ways to train, pushed me beyond what I thought I could handle, and I signed up for various races. I was hooked. Running became a part of my weekly rhythm and life.

However, I began to notice certain aches and pains which I attributed to my old age, but those grew into recurring back pain. Finally, I talked to an athletic trainer who told me that my problem was that I wasn't working on my core. He explained that strengthening my core muscles would help, if not solve, my back problems because a strong core would keep the rest of my body in alignment. And while I loathe crunches and sit-ups, I have to admit that he was right. I needed to focus on the core.

The word core, by definition, means that which is central, innermost, and the most essential part of anything. In exercise, it is the muscle group in your abdomen. In science, it is the nucleus of an atom. In geology, it is the mass which is 3,231 miles under the surface of the earth composed of Iron and Nickel. In business, it is something that you do which meets consumer needs, is hard to imitate, and can be leveraged to many products and markets (e.g., It is what pizza is to Pizza Hut). In terms of your annual review, it is the key gifts (competency) that you've been given. In values, it is the fundamental beliefs to which you hold.

So here's my question for you this morning: When it comes to your spiritual life, what's your core? What is the central, innermost, and most essential part of your soul-life? What is the defining center around which the rest of your life orbits?

Today we begin an exciting study of the book of Colossians that will address those questions. This New Testament book identifies the core of Christianity like few other books in the Bible. The writer, Paul, uses only four chapters to succinctly and powerfully highlight the centrality of Christ and demonstrate how it applies to life. Paul wants to bring this church back to the core message of the gospel so that they will know how to live. Next week we will see the cultural context and the false teaching that is in the background. But today I simply want to identify the singular message of this glorious book: Jesus is the center of everything.

Thus our title: **The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center**

My aim for this series is to help you see how central Jesus is in all of creation, and how his centrality should affect every area of our lives. In other words, we will learn much about Jesus so that we can be more Jesus-centered.

My plan is to move verse by verse through this book throughout 2008, and I would encourage you to listen intentionally, take good notes, and maybe even collect each week's notes into a folder for future use. Along with the notes that you take, you can pick up a copy of the sermon manuscript before or after the service.

Secondly, I would like to invite you to take a Scripture memory challenge that I'm calling Core Verses. Each week we will post in the worship folder or in the "News You Can Use" a particular memory verse that captures the heart and soul of next week's message. Each Sunday we will have a different way to briefly review that memory work. Some weeks we will have a scheduled recite. Other weeks I'm just going to spontaneously ask for a volunteer. I want to challenge you to get beyond the reading of Colossians; I want you to meditate on it, chew on it, and memorize it.

Finally, Greg Pilcher has done a marvelous job in producing a promo card that you can use to let other people know about this series. I want you to post these at your place of business, under the glass at a coffee shop, or give them to someone who you'd like to invite to College Park.

Needless to say, I am really excited about this series. I believe that God is really going to teach us some wonderful things. Eric and his team are working really hard to match our worship through singing with our worship through preaching. This is going to be a great series!

Why Colossians?

This is my first sermon series at College Park, and you might wonder why I've chosen this particular book for this season of ministry. There are four reasons:

1. It contains some of the most glorious passages about Christ in all the Bible

There are passages in this book that are incomparable in their exaltation of Christ! It is almost as if Paul runs out of adjectives to describe the Jesus whom he loves. Take these two examples:

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 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. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 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. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col 1:15-20)

11 In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. 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. Col 2:11-15

The book looks at Christ from multiple angles, calling us to bask in the glory of his person and work. It is like a diamond ring – the more you turn it the more brilliant it looks.

2. It fits perfectly College Park's historical principle to keep the Main One the main thing

Our mission as a church is to glorify God by making disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We flesh that mission out in what we call historical and cultural principles, some key philosophical standing stones that have guided the past and will guide our future.

Number one on that list is: The main thing is to keep the Main One (Jesus) the main thing. And that principle could well be the thesis statement for the entire book of Colossians.

One of the things that impressed me (in a good sense) with you, College Park, is your historical passion to make Jesus the focal point of this ministry. It is one of the things that attracted Sarah and me to this church, and I intended to help us move forward under the same banner.

3. It applies the centrality of Jesus to marriage, home, and work

You are going to find an elevated view of Christ in this book. The Christology of Colossians soars really high. And at the same time, the book is very practical, and I love that. I love it when I'm able to bask in the light of the greatness of God and then learn how to live it out in real life.

Colossians balances the elevated Christology of chapters one and two with the practical instructions of chapters three and four. The material in this book is not the stuff of "ivory-tower" discussions nor does it answer questions that no one is asking. No, this book moves from the lofty, exalted, preeminent Christ to issues of moral purity, anger, marriage, child-rearing, and work. It infuses Christ-centeredness into real life.

4. Living Jesus-centered is a primary battleground

It is my belief that Jesus-centered living is a real battle that disciples of Jesus face. The beauty of Colossians is the way that Paul calls the followers of Jesus to live in light of the existing centrality of Christ. The Bible is Jesus-centered. Heaven is Jesus-centered. God made it that way, and we have to constantly guard our hearts and our lives from moving from Jesus-centeredness. You see, we often don't make Jesus the center of life. Listen to the powerful centrality of Jesus in heaven:

6 And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. 8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. 9 And they sang a new song, saying,

"Worthy are you to take the scroll

"Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
10 and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth."

11 Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" 13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" 14 And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped." Rev 5:6-14

Therefore, the real battle is to live in the **light of** the centrality of Jesus – to let the priority of Christ take over. The challenge is to live out Colossians 3:17 – “17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Knowing that Jesus is the core is one thing; the real challenge is living in such a way that every area of life is transformed by the centrality of Christ. Or, to use this great logo that Greg made, to be sure that every orbit of our lives revolves around Christ.

So those are the reasons why I feel like this is the time and place for us to be. And it is my prayer that we will all come to understand more fully the eternal significance of the centrality of Jesus and determine how to live by this Christ-centered core.

I want you to think creatively about how Jesus **could and should** transform every area of your life. How does Christ-centeredness relate to corporate worship, Bible reading, ministry, giving, raising kids, and your job? How does Christ-centeredness relate to TV-watching, internet surfing, Facebook postings, I-pod listening, Spring Banquets, and dating relationships? Or, to bring it right into my world on Friday: how does Christ-centeredness relate to three trips to the License office or moving?

Sarah said something earlier this week that really drove home this point. As we were preparing for the movers to come to our home in Michigan she said, “My goal is not to move. My goal is to not sin while we move.” “Whatever you do...do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col 3:17).

Let me encourage you to take good notes. Discuss these matters at home. Take the challenge of memorizing a few verses each week (Core Verses). Work through application points in your small groups. But more than anything, I want you to ask yourself this question: “What does a Jesus-centered life look like for me?”

Jesus Is The Core!

Next week we will dive into the historical and cultural background of the book. We will examine what prompted the apostle Paul to write the book, and we will look very specifically at what is called the “Colossian heresy.” In other words, we will try to figure out the problem that Paul was attempting to address. But today I simply want to help you understand the big picture outline of the book.

The book and our series will be divided up into four parts or you could think of it as the core and three orbits:

- Core: Living with Jesus at the Center (1:1-1:23)
- Orbit 1: Jesus Centered Ministry (1:24-2:7)
- Orbit 2: Jesus Centered Thinking (2:8-3:4)

- Orbit 3: Jesus Centered Living (3:5-4:18)

Jesus at the Center (1:1-23)

“Image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation, creator of everything – in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, physical and spiritual, the pre-existent One, the sustainer of everything, the head of the church, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, PREEMINENT, the full revelation of God, and the great reconciler.” These are words Paul uses to describe the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Every word and phrase highlights a unique and powerful dimension of who Jesus is and what he has done. Paul looks at Jesus from multiple angles and celebrates the centrality and preeminence of Jesus.

We are reminded that everything Paul lists is a spiritual reality. These are facts. How many of you remember how Walter Cronkite signed off each week? He would say, “And that’s the way it is.” Well, the things that Paul lists in chapter one are the way things are in the universe. So you don’t make Christ the head or preeminent or sovereign. He doesn’t ask your permission to be these. We don’t elect him. He doesn’t run for office. He doesn’t need your vote.

Jesus is free! Free from our approval, consent, or validation. So we don’t make him Lord. He is Lord. You don’t make him the center; he is the center. The question is not whether or not he’s the center – that is an established fact. The real question is whether your life orbits around him and whether the various parts of your life orbit around him. In other words, you don’t make Jesus the center; you submit your life to **reality** of Jesus being the center.

And as you do that (submit your life to the centrality of Jesus), you come to realize how off-center your life was before him, how meaningless life would be without him, and how grateful you are for his love and grace. Jesus doesn’t need you in his orbit, but you need him!

You see the beauty of the centrality of Jesus is the way in which God is bringing back the entire creation through the person and work of Christ. The grand plan of redemption is to reconcile the created with the Creator, and Jesus is THE central figure in this divine drama.

19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. 21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him... (Col 1:19-22).

Therefore, Jesus is the center of creation, redemption, and worship. The goal of Colossians is to help us fully understand and appreciate the superiority of Jesus in all things, and that is the focus of the first twenty-three verses.

Jesus-Centered Ministry (1:24-2:7)

We are introduced to the first orbit of Jesus-centeredness in 1:24. Paul, in very pastoral tones, shares his heart for the church. He moves quickly from the exaltation of Christ to his deep love for those to whom he is writing. His words are filled with love and concern:

“I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake” (1:24)

“I’m filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of... the church” (1:24)

“...warning everyone and teaching everyone...that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (1:28)

“I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you...” (2:1)

“...that their hearts may be encouraged, knit together in love...” (2:2)

“I say this in order that no one may delude you...” (2:4)

“I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ” (2:5)

“As you received Christ Jesus...so walk in Him” (2:6)

We see that getting Jesus at the core creates the motivation that is at the heart of all ministry. Jesus-centered ministry looks like joyful and intentional suffering, loving correction, deep and personal pain, laboring in prayer, rejoicing in growth, and a relentless passion to see people learn to walk like Jesus. All of it flows from Jesus-centeredness.

You cannot do ministry without Jesus at the center.

Jesus-Centered Thinking (2:8-3:4)

As we will see next week, the church was exposed to heretical teaching, and Paul was concerned that they were getting caught up in it (2:8). The solution was not an apologetic attack on the heresy, but a call for them to think rightly about Jesus. In the second section or orbit, Paul identifies truth upon truth:

- “In him the fullness of deity dwells bodily” (2:9)
- “you’ve been filled in him” (2:10)
- “you were circumcised...by the circumcision of Christ” (2:11)
- “you were buried with him...you were also raised with him through faith” (2:12)
- “you were dead...God made {you} alive, having forgiven us...” (2:13)
- “canceling the record of debt that stood against us” (2:14)

And then he calls them to apply these truths with boldness:

- “let no one pass judgment on you...” (2:16)
- “Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and angel worship...” (2:18)

He points them to Christ with a clarion call:

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:1-3).

Think about Christ. Celebrate the truths of Christ. Live on the promises of God. Don't allow yourself to be deluded or pressured into trusting in anything. Set your mind on Christ because your life is hidden with Christ. Jesus is the core!

So that challenge here is to think about Christ. I will say this often: “The problem with our thinking is that we don't think about our thinking.” Colossians calls us to think about what we think about Christ.

Jesus-Centered Living (3:5-4:18)

The third and final orbit is where Paul gets very practical. His argument sound like this: If Jesus is the supreme core of everything, put away anything that doesn't fit with him and put on everything that does fit, integrating Jesus into every area of life. Jesus at the center repels some stuff, creates other stuff, and transforms all relationships.

We see first what Jesus-centered living repels: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness (3:5), anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk and lying (3:8-9). This stuff just doesn't fit with Jesus-centered living. These are the sins for which he died. These sins indicate that self and the flesh are in control, not Jesus.

Second, we see what is created: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiveness, and the peace of Christ (3:12-15). These are the things that only make sense if Jesus is creating them.

Third, we see the invasion of Jesus into the relationships of life:

- Wives are to submit to husbands (3:18)
- Husbands are to love their wives (3:19)
- Children should obey their parents (3:20)
- Fathers should not provoke their children (3:21)
- Servants should obey masters (3:22)
- Masters should be fair to servants (4:1)
- Our speech should always be gracious (4:6)

Do you see it? Orbiting around the core are all these relationships, and every one of them is different because of what is at the center. Jesus is powerful enough to transform any and every area of life!

And that is why this book can be so transforming. Living with Jesus at the center could literally transform every area of life.

Listen carefully to me! Jesus is the core. He's the core of everything, of real ministry, of biblical thinking, and practical living.

And yet there are some of you here today who really underestimate Jesus:

- You refuse to admit your need for a Savior despite God's patient wooing of you.
- You develop "religion" without a relationship with Jesus
- You live as if Jesus were your buddy rather than the Sovereign King of the Universe
- You compartmentalize your life saying that you believe in Jesus but you are just backslidden or you play loose with his Lordship in your life
- You use him to get what you want (i.e., to get into heaven, to fix up my marriage)

So where does Jesus find you today? Jesus is not some add-on or upgrade to your life. He is not just something you believe in or some spiritual lucky charm. He's not your co-pilot, your buddy, or your life-coach.

He is the image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation, creator of everything, the pre-existent One, the sustainer of everything, the head of the church, the firstborn from the dead, the PREEMINENT one.

In other words, Jesus is not your lackey – He is LORD! Jesus is the core, and everything in life revolves around Him.

And the message of Colossians is the call of God to us today: We need to learn how to live with Jesus at the center.

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