

Entrusted: Stewarding the Gospel (Colossians 1:11-20)

Rev. Melissa Hatfield

First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/entrusted-stewarding-the-gospel/

In my home are multiple cherished family heirlooms. Unlike eating my vegetables growing up, my parents didn't force me to take these treasures. These pieces are part of my home by choice. My bedroom set belonged to my mom's parents. My daily silverware and many other kitchen items came from my dad's parents. The beautiful cherry writing desk in my living room was lovingly purchased by my great, great grandparents on my dad's side. These are just a few of the things I possess from family gone before me. I often think about my family when I use them. I imagine them sitting at the desk writing or going to a merchant and selecting these items for their home, never imagining a great-great-granddaughter might one day use them in her home.

One of my other cherished heirlooms is this family Bible that belonged to my great, great grandparents, George and Reta Mast. While there are a few newspaper clippings about significant family moments tucked inside, the grander story this heirloom tells is a legacy of faith that began generations ago and continues today. If I were to have a conversation with my ancestors, they would probably say the most crucial possession they hoped to pass along to their family was a devotion to Jesus Christ. I think they'd also be slightly impressed at how well some of their purchases have held up, too.

Just down the hall from our sanctuary are cherished pieces of our church's rich history, beginning from our start in 1837. One hundred eighty-five years of stories of faithfulness and failings, family celebrations, and family disputes. Often when I walk down this hallway to my right and look at the photos hanging on the wall of many of our former pastors, I wonder what some early ones would think of our church today. How we dress, the music we sing, seeing youth run through the building in the dark playing our favorite game, or what they would think to find a female pastor talking to them.

Like my great, great grandparents, I imagine what the saints who came before us at FBC most hoped for our beloved congregation is our faithful devotion to Christ above all things and faithful stewardship of the Gospel entrusted to us. Buildings come and go, traditions and programs come and go, music styles come and go, and pastors and members come and go. What remains is Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the head of the body, the church, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.

This has been the core anthem of the church for the ages, the declaration of our faith in the authority of Christ. Yet, it is easy for this anthem to be overpowered by other louder, less-than anthems of the day.

This was true for the people of Colossae (Col-LOSS-see), whom Paul writes to in our text today. From prison, Paul had heard from a friend who planted the church, that while many were remaining steadfast in their devotion to Christ, some of the believers in the city were becoming disoriented and misled by teachings contrary to those of the apostles. In Colossae, there was a confusing mixture of local folk religion, local Jewish beliefs, a ruling Roman empire, and now the ways of Jesus thrown in, and the waters were getting muddy. There was a temptation to surrender their lives in these various dominions and authorities who seemed to control them anyway as well as to put hope in their good works rather than to trust Christ was above them all. Need help with war? Plead to the god Mars for victory in battle. Need help with love? The goddess, Aphrodite, will come to your aid. Want to achieve power? Align with the ruling empire or overthrow it. Want to please God and attain righteousness and salvation? Follow the Law above all things.

Into these muddied waters, Paul writes a letter to believers he'd never met, addressing some of the cultural pressures they were facing and challenging them to a higher devotion to Jesus.

Chapter one begins with a long prayer of thanks to God for the Christians in Colossae. He's heard of their faithfulness, and he wants it to continue. So, he starts with the why rather than the how. The why is Jesus. He knows that true and ultimate devotion to Jesus doesn't come primarily from being commanded, but rather from being captivated by the beauty and profound love of Jesus. It makes perfect sense why Paul moves into a poem that is all about the power and love of Jesus, the creator and redeemer of all.

Verses 15 -20 in our text today are known as one of the Christ hymns, a confessional hymn or poem that teaches about Christ.

Hymns and songs have long been a feature of cultures. We have our songs as Americans. We have our hymns as Christians. The Romans had their hymns. They sang songs about everything and used hymns to indoctrinate and form people in the ways of the empire.ⁱ Jews and non-Jews living under the Roman empire would know these hymns, whether they sang them or not.

And in response, early believers took the tradition of Jewish resistance poetry and created hymns and poems of resistance they could sing to challenge the worldview of the day.ⁱⁱ This form of literature confronted, in indirect and sometimes direct ways, the narratives of the day that might mislead or confuse the community of believers. Think of it like singing "It is Well" when the world says it is not well or when we face trials that make us question God's faithfulness and goodness. Or a group of people singing "We Shall Overcome" or Billie Holiday's

"Strange Fruit," which both call out and name the evils of racism. Songs and hymns and poetry uniquely expose truth we are unable or unwilling to see until melody pry open our hearts and, then, our eyes.

In their commentary *Colossians Remixed*, Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmat argue that this hymn is even somewhat treasonous. The authors lay out how each line of this Christ hymn challenges how the people had been influenced to put their hope in the powers of the world and empire and Paul's confronting of that view with the truth of Christ instead.ⁱⁱⁱ

Caesar's image was everywhere, and Caesar was described as the "Beginning." Yet in this hymn, Paul boldly proclaims that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and Jesus is the beginning. Christ is sovereign, not Caesar. Christ is sovereign, not the nation. Christ is sovereign, not the economy. Christ is sovereign, no one else.^{iv}

Before Paul addresses the cultural ideas confusing the believers in the rest of this letter, he starts with a powerful Christ hymn declaring Christ as creator and redeemer of all. Paul was stewarding the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, by reminding them Christ holds everything together. Jesus is all we need. Jesus is everything. Jesus is King.

Whether in first-century Colossae or the twenty-first-century United States, the cautions of Colossians are needed.

So many things are trying to be our hope, our end, our god, and we allow it. Our Western consumer culture seeks to have first place. Our national identity aims to have first place. Our families, our preferences, and our comfort seek to have first place. Our rules and ways of living seek to have first place.

Yet, these things ultimately fail to meet our hopes and longings and set us up for endless cycles of disappointment and even pain. Some of these things are necessary, even beneficial. But they cannot be our source of hope nor have our greatest allegiance. That is reserved for Christ alone.

How are we stewarding the Gospel now and for those who come behind us? Do people see our lives and know Christ is our beginning and end? Do they hear our words, our tone and believe we've been transferred from this kingdom to the kingdom of God, where love is how we are to be known? Do they read our social media posts and see and experience the good news of Jesus?

In chapter 3 of Colossians, Paul writes these words to those who have been entrusted with the good news, *"Each of you is now a new person. You are becoming more and more like your Creator, and you will understand him better. It doesn't matter if you are a Greek or a Jew, or if*

you are circumcised or not. You may even be a barbarian or a Scythian, and you may be a slave or a free person. Yet Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

God loves you and has chosen you as his own special people. So be gentle, kind, humble, meek, and patient. Put up with each other, and forgive anyone who does you wrong, just as Christ has forgiven you. Love is more important than anything else. It is what ties everything completely together.

Each one of you is part of the body of Christ, and you were chosen to live together in peace. So let the peace that comes from Christ control your thoughts. And be grateful. Let the message about Christ completely fill your lives, while you use all your wisdom to teach and instruct each other. With thankful hearts, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. Whatever you say or do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks to God the Father because of him.

There's a funny cartoon of an older dad standing with his adult son in front of the dad's open garage full of stuff. Every inch covered. The dad gestures to it all and says to his son, "One day, son, all of this will be yours!"

The family heirlooms I cherish in my home may very well end with me and that is okay. I won't force them upon my niece and nephew. They bring me joy, but they are simply things. They are not what I most want to steward for those who come behind me.

There are a lot of things, traditions, and practices precious to us that we want to pass along to others, but they aren't necessarily theirs to take. These are not what have been entrusted to us. What has been entrusted to us is the gospel, the good news of Jesus, Creator and Redeemer of all. In verse 22, Paul writes, "... by giving himself completely at the Cross, actually dying for you, Christ brought you over to God's side and put your lives together, whole and holy in his presence. You don't walk away from a gift like that! You stay grounded and steady in the bond of trust, constantly turned into the Message, careful not to be distracted or diverted. There is no other Message – just this one. Every creature under heaven gets the same Message. I, Paul, am a messenger of this Message."

This is the gospel entrusted to us. There is no other Message – just this one. Through the cross, Christ has provided the sacrifice necessary to redeem us and reconcile us to God.

With grateful hearts, we steward all entrusted to us - vocation, creation, gifts, wealth, the Gospel, all - in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the glory of God and the good of others.

Let us conclude today by proclaiming aloud together this Christ Hymn, this declaration of the sovereignty of Christ the King, spoken by believers throughout the ages and the age to come.

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. He himself is before all things, and 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. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 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.

Amen.

ⁱ Ibid, 428.

ⁱⁱ Mark S. Medley, *Subversive song: Imagining Colossians 1:15-20 as a social protest hymn in the context of Roman empire*, Review and Expositor, 2019, Vol 116(4) 427.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-11-18/colossians-111-20-2/>

^{iv} <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-11-18/colossians-111-20-2/>