



Pastor Kyle Mercer
Gospel First

July 20, 2025
Series: First
Colossians 1:1-14

**BIG IDEA - PUTTING THE GOSPEL FIRST TRANSFORMS OUR
IDENTITY, RESHAPES OUR CHARACTER, REORIENTS OUR
MISSION, AND DEEPENS OUR PRAYERS**

Good morning, Two Cities Church. Whether you're in here or down in Lexington, are you guys ready for a brand-new series? Yes, it's going to be great. Before we do that, I need to tell you about how we're preparing for the fall. Listen up, moms and dads, especially moms and dads of rising sixth graders. We need to pray for those heading into middle school. Right?

Here's what we're doing. This is really special. We have an event for you if you have a rising sixth grader. We call it *Rise Up* because we're very clever here. So, you're leaving fifth grade and you're going into sixth grade. Guys, two years ago when my daughter Addy was making that transition into the student ministry, Margy and I went to this event.

I was excited because I love our church, and I love the student ministry staff. I thought it was going to be good. It was so much better than I thought it was going to be. It's a ton of fun. You'll have a great time. It's for the parent and the student. You're going to get to learn about the vision, the values, and the vehicles of our ministry.

Here's what's really neat, moms and dads. If you'll show up at this event (I believe it's August 16), you're also going to meet a bunch of other parents who have rising sixth graders. Part of what you want to do is... You care a lot about who your kids' friends are, and also you'd like to know the parents, so this is an opportunity to do that.

Listen up, high schoolers and parents of high schoolers. We want to let you know a couple months in advance about the high school fall retreat, September 12-14. We do a lot of stuff in the student ministry, but then we have these catalytic, key, critical events. What the Heights Conference is to our church, the fall retreat is to the student ministry, so you don't want to miss that.

Now, I need to specifically talk for a second about the fall...we're preparing for the fall...to the Winston-Salem Campus. Guys, listen. We're in the middle of July. Summer is going to be over soon. I hate to tell myself that. We're heading into the fall, and what we're seeing... I mean, you can look around in here if you're at the Winston-Salem Campus.

You can see that even in the middle of the summer, we are packed in here. I know you see some seats up, but here's how you know you don't have room for new people. Here's the question: Can a family of four that shows up late easily find a seat? I know they should show up on time, but they don't. So, here's what we've done. Our 9:00 is full. Our 11:00 is even more full.

When you come to our 5:00 service... It's a great service, guys. I promise; it's an identical service, and usually it's my best sermon, because Dave has given me feedback twice. "Don't say this," you know, and all that. So, by the time we're at the 5:00, it's awesome, but we only have about 500 people there. I'm not complaining. I thank God for those 500 people, but it means we have hundreds of open seats.

We've tried everything to get you guys to go there. We've shot videos. I've said, "Would you please go? Take the shortest mission trip you're ever going to take...just to the 5:00," but it hasn't worked like we want it to work. That's fine. So, we're starting something new. Are you ready for this? I am pumped about this. In two weeks, we are launching food trucks at 5:00. That's right.

After every 5:00 service, from August 3 through October, we're going to have food trucks at the end of the service, and we want you to hang out. We want to give you a little sugar stick to come on out there. Here's the great thing, because some of you young pros have been saying... I hear you. I hear you. You've been saying, "I'm in a Community Group, and I'm on a serving team, but I still want to meet more people." This is your chance.

Others of you have young kids. You have Junior and Jimmy and all of them. Here's what you need to do. We're going to turn our parking lot into Cugino Forno, in that sense. Here's what I mean. If you're a young family, you know what I'm talking about. You want a place where your kids can have scooters and bikes. We're going to do all that. We're going to partition off an area.

So, here's what I want you to do. I want you to prayerfully consider coming to the 5:00 service, at least occasionally. We're going to be doing this for the next three months. If it catches on, maybe we'll continue to do it. And guess who's going to help us launch the first one on August 3? Mark Clark. Mark Clark is back in town.

Raise your hand if you were with Mark Clark at the Heights last year. His mic went out. We might cut his mic during this service as well just to mess with him a little bit. Guys, he is so funny and such a good Bible teacher. He's going to be here on August 3. That's just two weeks from now.

If you want to go early next week and check out the 5:00 service before the food trucks get there, and you want to pick out your seat, that's fine. You can show up next week. With that said, guys, let's pray, and then we're going to dive into a brand-new series.

Lord, it's good to laugh together. It's good to just celebrate together. Lord, we want to try new things. We want to honor you. Our heart is, if we don't have a seat for people... Most new people come on Sunday morning. If we don't have a seat, then we don't have a place for a person. If we don't have a place for a person, we can't disciple them. We can't share Christ with them. We can't invest in their families.

So, I pray you would create an incredible... Our church has such an incredible culture, but I particularly pray that you would create a Sunday night culture where so many good conversations are had around the food trucks after the service, where families are meeting each other, and where kids are making new friends. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

All right. What is numero uno in your life? What is first and foremost in your life? What is the most important thing in your life? Listen. Do not give me the right answer; give me the real answer. Not out loud, though. Don't give me the religious answer. You know what the answer *should* be, right? That's the problem with you and me. You know, "What's first in your life?" "Jesus." It's like, "Really? Doesn't look like it."

There was a movement years ago. Did you ever see these videos? "I Am Second." I don't know how they started. So first there was the concept of "I am second," and then I later saw the teaching of "I am third." Someone was like, "Okay. You thought you were second; you're actually third." Whether it's "I am second" or "I am third," I'll tell you what happened.

They would tell their testimony. They'd usually get famous Christians, and they would say something like, "Christ is first, and I am second." Then, later, another organization... It was "Christ is first, others are second, and I am third." Is that biblical? Yes. Are many of us living that? I don't think so.

We're in a series called *First*. You can type or turn to Colossians, chapter 1. We're going to basically ask...*Is Christ first in our lives, really?* The answer for a lot of us, if we're really honest, is "No" or "Not most of the time." If you're new to Two Cities Church, we like to tell the truth here. I know we're in church, so it's no place to be honest, but you can't get help if you're not honest.

Let's be honest. For a lot of us, Christ is not first in our lives. So then, how do we put or place or position Christ first in our lives? Well, I'm glad you asked that question, because that's the whole question the book of Colossians talks about. Here's what's interesting. If you've been following along for a while, we are in a Multiply Initiative in our church.

How does this series *First* fit under the greater initiative to multiply? Here's why: Whatever you love first, you'll multiply most. You'll talk about it the most. You'll want to invite others to it the most. So, here's what the book of Colossians is about. I'm not going to give you a big introduction today, because we're going to be in the book for two or three months.

The book of Colossians is about giving us a bigger view of Jesus. Here's Paul's answer, then we're going to dive in. If you could talk to the apostle Paul... "According to your book of Colossians, why isn't Jesus first in my life if he's supposed to be?" Do you know what Paul's answer is? It's because you don't know him well enough.

The whole book is about the sufficiency, the preeminence, and the supremacy... The Christology in this book is very, very high, because Paul goes, "If you really see Christ for who he is, he will become the sun in the solar system of your life, and then the planet of sexuality, the planet of money, the planet of hobbies, the planet of friendship, and the planet of career will all go right where they should, and they'll be held by the weight of his glory."

All right. We have a lot to talk about. Colossians chapter 1, verse 1. Let's look at this. We have to be introduced to the author and the audience. Here we go. ***"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother..."*** I tell you this basically every time we talk about the apostle Paul. I probably feel most at home teaching and preaching through Paul's epistles.

By the way, if you care about this, Colossians was the first book of the Bible I ever preached through entirely, and I did it here when we launched the church. But we got rid of all of those sermons. They're actually very terrible. I look back on them now... I was like, "What was I doing?" Thanks for coming, those of you who were there.

Anyway, I love the apostle Paul so much. About two months ago, there were 70 of us from Two Cities... It was a really neat opportunity. I hope to do it again and go other

places. Seventy of us went to Greece, and the name of the trip was the *Footsteps of Paul*. Every morning, I got up and was like, "I cannot wait to see whatever we're going to see next."

Do you know what they'd do? They'd be like, "All right. We're going to go to this area called *Neapolis*. All right, right *here*. Right *here* is where the apostle Paul docked his boat, got off the ship, and brought the gospel to Europe." You're like, "Who *is* this guy?" He's like a superhero. He just gets off the boat. Then you walk into Corinth, and you're like, "Whoa!" You see the ruins. You're like, "The apostle Paul just walked here and said, 'Where's the synagogue, and where's the marketplace? I need to tell people about Jesus.'"

Here's the thing about Paul. Paul was so confident because Paul knew *who* he was because he knew *whose* he was. In fact, do you know what's interesting? He says, "Paul, an apostle," because he sees himself as sent. Yes, he had a unique office, unique access to Christ. He saw the risen Christ.

Here's what else is interesting about Colossians. I'm giving you a little bit of background. Colossians is one of only four, what are called, *Prison Epistles*. So, Paul is writing Colossians from prison, but he doesn't even mention it in his intro. He'll make two (you have to look for it) references to writing from prison in this letter.

Now, what would *you* be doing if you were writing from prison? Do you know what *I'd* be doing? "Hey, guys, I'm in prison. Send food. Come visit me." Paul is like, "This is so normal for me I don't even really think about it." The old joke is when Paul got to a city, he asked where the prison was because he wanted to know where he'd be spending the night. Paul was in the slammer at least four times, one time for two years.

Here's what's interesting. Do you see what he says in verse 1? He doesn't mention being in prison; he mentions the will of God. Now, how many of us...? When things are going well, we feel like we're in God's will, and when things are not going well, we feel like we're out of God's will. As soon as something bad happens in our life, our conscience condemns us, and we start thinking we're outside the will of God. Paul goes, "No, no. I'm in the will of God even though I'm in prison."

Here's what I want you to see. Paul writes to the Colossians. Verse 2: ***"To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father."*** Okay. We need to talk about the church at Colossae or the Colossian church. I'll use those interchangeably.

This is one of the only churches (it might be the *only* church) Paul writes to that he didn't plant. In fact, here's another interesting thing about the church at Colossae or the city of

Colossae: Paul never visited it. Paul didn't plant this church. Paul never visited. That's why in a couple of verses, Paul is going to go, "Hey, here's what I'm hearing about you." Why is he hearing it? Because he has never actually been there.

In fact, Colossae is not even mentioned in the book of Acts. It gets one other mention in your Bible in the book of Philemon, which is one page long. So, there's not a lot on Colossae. It is the smallest, most insignificant city that Paul wrote to, but God has people everywhere and cares about every city, big cities and small cities.

So, here's what we think happened. We're trying to piece together a couple of different parts of the Scriptures, but this is what most scholars agree on. Paul is in Ephesus for three years. While in Ephesus, he leads to Christ Epaphras, who also might be Epaphroditus. We're not sure if that's the same person.

It appears that Epaphras quits his job after a year or two, goes into Paul's church-planting residency, builds a team, and moves about 150 miles south to Colossae to plant the Colossian church. So, does Paul ever visit Colossae? We don't know. We'll ask him when we get to heaven. It's going to be a long line to see Paul in heaven, but we'll ask him.

All right. Here's what I want to do with the time left, because that was just the introduction. I don't want to miss the flyover part. We tend to fly over these parts. With our time left, I want to tell you four areas of your life where Christ needs to be first. This is how we're going to start the series. So, how would I put Christ first?

First, he must be first in your *identity*. Let's read the same verse again. It's verse 2. ***"To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father."*** I want you to notice this, because like I said, this tends to be the flyover part when we read. You know, there are the flyover states you've never been to, but you fly over them...North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas. This is like the flyover part of our New Testament, but it's so important.

I want you to notice, in verse 2, here's the first thing Paul does: Paul tells them who God says they are. I want you to know that somebody is always trying to tell you who you are. Think about this. I was thinking about childhood development and how we grew up. I'm like, "Well, who is the first person who tells us who we are?" Our parents. It's deep in us. Until a kid is probably 7 or 8, the main people in their life (so this is a big responsibility, parents) who tell the kid who they are is the parents.

Every once in a while, I can just see somebody, and I'm like, "They have a really good mom and dad." I just know it. The way they view themselves, the confidence with which they carry themselves... They have a really good mom and dad. Sometimes things parents

said to a little kid, you know, "You're stupid. You'll never be good at things..." We have to be very careful.

So, what happens is when we're little, our parents tell us who we are. Then, what happens when we go to middle school? Our friends tell us who we are. This is why middle school, adolescence, and identity crisis are the exact same things, because what you start to figure out...

You're like, "Am I the rich kid? Am I the poor kid? Am I the middle-class kid? Am I the good student? Am I the good-looking student? Oh, I'm not good-looking. Am I funny? Am I the partier?" Trust me. I mean, at one level, we're asking that question the rest of our lives. Some people have not graduated from that experience in middle school.

Paul says, "I want to tell you who you are." Now, he gives two different identities: *saint* and *sibling*. Well, "brothers," but we say "brothers and sisters." Paul goes, "I want to tell you who you are as you relate to God and who you are as you relate to one another." That's really important. What are the two main relationships in my life? My relationship with God and my relationship with others. Great.

He says we're saints. Now, if you're like me... I've told you this before. I am a retired Catholic. I'm retired. I grew up Catholic, nominal Catholic. I'm no longer Catholic. When you grow up Catholic, you think saints are special. To this day, what is every Catholic church named? "Saint [somebody]." Right? There's St. Teresa Catholic Church, St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, St. Matthew...

A lot of people do this. The Anglicans can do this sometimes. The Episcopalians do this sometimes. I don't know about the Anglicans and Episcopalians. The Catholics think *saint* is a special class of Christian. Like, "Mother Teresa is a saint, but you ain't" kind of thing.

Now, here's the thing. If you're in Christ, the Bible says you're a saint. Here's what it means: you've been forgiven and made righteous. *Saint* is a status God gives you because of what he did through his Son. He makes you holy. You're basically supposed to live out of this identity. So, that's the first thing.

The second thing he says is that you're a sibling. In other words, the church is your family. God is your Father. Now, how many of us, if we really, really believed the local church was our family, it would change how we live? When you realize the church is your family, you're like, "Okay. I love you even when I don't like you. We're going to fight, because that's what family does, but when we're done fighting, we're going to forgive one another. We're not leaving, because we're totally committed to one another."

Notice he takes both of *those* identities and gives them an even bigger identity. He says, "You're saints and faithful brothers and sisters," and then he says, "And all of that is in Christ." Do you know that *in Christ* is Paul's favorite phrase? There is no phrase Paul uses more than the phrase *in Christ*.

The phrase *in Christ* is used 33 times in Colossians. Here's what it is. Here's a big phrase. It's the doctrine of the union with Christ. Basically, it means when you believe in Jesus Christ, you're so connected to him, you might as well be inside of him. You are hidden with God in Christ. It speaks of protection. It speaks of status.

So, I want us to talk a little bit about identity. As I talk about that, some of you might think, "Is identity a big deal?" Let me ask you this: Can you do anything without an ID? Some of you go "Vote in certain states." No, seriously. I recently had to... I waited until the last minute, because this is what I always do. I recently had to get my Real ID.

I went to the DMV at, like, 6:30 in the morning, and I still had to wait for three hours, because everybody needs an ID. You can't travel internationally without a passport. You can't go to my favorite store, Costco, without a membership ID. ID is so unbelievably important.

What is our identity? It's where we get our sense of value. It's where we get our sense of self-worth. It's interesting. The late, great Tim Keller, who I often quote, said that in the Western world (that's where we live), you get your identity by being an individual who's successful, whatever that means for you.

Your identity in the West is like, "How much money do you make? What job do you have? What neighborhood do you live in? What car do you drive? How good are you in your industry?" He said what's interesting is if you go into Eastern culture, you don't get your identity as an individual; you get your identity in your family and in your nation. In the West, the most important part of my name is *Kyle*. In the East, the most important part of my name would be *Mercer*, that I'm part of a family.

So, Paul says, "Okay. I need you to know who you are, and I need you to know whose you are." Here's what I want you to do. Don't answer out loud; just have the conversation with yourself. Where do you find your identity *really*? How do you introduce yourself to people you've never met? You might say, "Well, I just say my name." Okay. If you could be honest, what are the things you hope people ask about you or you're eager and excited to share about yourself?

I remember this one guy. He was a young, good-looking guy. He ended up getting a job somewhere else. He showed up, and I met him. He was newly married. I met him and his wife after service. I asked, "Hey, what do you do for a living?" He very proudly said, "I'm

a doctor." I said, "Are you at Novant or are you at Wake Baptist? What's your specialty?" He goes, "I'm actually a first-year resident." Gotcha, a little bit.

I looked it up. I guess you are officially a doctor then, but he kind of knew "I'm not a doctor in the way that you probably think I'm a doctor, but this is so important to me that it's one of the first things I want to let you know about, and I want to sound as high-status as I can in saying it."

Where do you find your identity, guys? It's like we've never moved on from high school. Do you find your identity in the car you drive, in the neighborhood you live in, in the stores you shop at? "I'm the kind of person who buys all of my groceries at Whole Foods and Trader Joe's." It's silly, but do we find our identity in our clothing?

Recently, my daughter wanted to get a pair of Birkenstocks. Do you know how expensive real Birkenstocks are? I looked it up. I'm like, "Birkenstocks are \$120, but these things that *look* like Birkenstocks but don't say 'Birkenstock' are \$20." You know what I mean? I'm like, "If you get more than 10 feet away, you can't tell the difference."

So, I said, "Addy, let's get the fake Birkenstocks, not the real Birkenstocks." She said, "Dad, I don't want any dupes." These youth today. I said, "Here's the deal. I'll pay the \$25 (or whatever it was) for this, but if you want the Birkenstocks, you have to pay the rest." She loves her dupes.

We all have that. Right? Have you ever looked at the back of someone...? You're like, "Is that lululemon?" "Nope, it's not. It's the cheaper version of it." "Oh, okay." We've all had this, guys. Here's the problem with other identities. I don't want to just tell you, "Oh, your identity can't be in *this*, *that*, and the other thing."

Here's the problem with all of our other identities: they're secondary and temporary. Let me explain this to you. If your identity is in looking good... And it's not wrong to want to look good, but I'm talking about this becomes the primary identity in your life. If your primary identity is being good-looking, you're going to have a really hard time getting old.

Recently, Jeff Bezos... You've heard of him, right? Did you see the wedding they just had? I saw pictures from it. When you see his new wife, you almost feel bad for her. You're like, "She's still a teenager." I can see her. She's trying so hard and has unlimited money to try, but she just will not admit to herself that she's getting old, because her identity has always been in how she looks.

If your identity is in your job, you can't retire, and you don't even know who you are when you do retire. If your primary identity, the most important thing in the world to

you, is being a mom, then when your kids get out of the house, you're going to be like, "Who am I?" Normally, what happens is "Hey, can you get married really quick? Because I need some kids. I need some grandkids really soon, because I don't know what to do if I'm not taking care of kids."

Then, our culture doesn't help with identity, because our culture says your primary identity is sexuality and gender. They basically tell people, "Hey, listen. The most important thing about you is your sexuality," which is not true. I mean, don't get me wrong. Sexuality is a powerful force. Freud thought sexuality explained everything. It doesn't, but it's powerful.

Here's what they say: "Sexuality is your primary identity, and there are a lot of choices." Now do you know why people are anxious? "Okay, there's something very important about you, and there are a hundred options, but it's the most important thing about you." Then here's what they say: "And it can change at any moment." I want you to understand that's the message. Then we wonder, "Why are young people anxious, stressed, and depressed?" Because sexuality is not our primary identity. It can't hold it.

Christ must be first in your identity. Christ must be first in your *affections*. Let me show you this. We're in verse 3. He says, **"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you..."** Isn't it amazing? Paul is thankful for the Colossians, and he has never even met them. Some of you go, "That's probably why he's thankful." It's hard to be thankful for the people we *do* know, often, isn't it? It's easier sometimes to be thankful for a meal or a vacation than the people in our lives who are here all the time.

When my good friend Andy Jump passed (it's coming up on the two-year anniversary of this)... The night he passed, I had about 10 guys over at my house. We sat on the back porch. We stayed up for three or four hours, and the whole time, we talked about Andy and how much we loved him and missed him. One of the guys at the end of the night... I'll never forget this. He said, "Guys, almost everything we said about Andy we never got to tell him." Then he said, "Guys, let's be better at telling people all of the things we appreciate about them while they're alive."

Paul goes, "I'm so thankful for you." He says, "I want you to know I'm praying for you," and then he says this. This is where, I told you, he says he has heard some things. Verse 4: **"...since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven."**

By the way, did you notice those three words, *faith*, *hope*, and *love*? Some of you have been to T.J. Maxx before, "Live, laugh, love." Instead of "Live, laugh, love," Paul says,

"That's not the best." Paul says, "Faith, hope, love." Some of you go "Eat, pray, love." No, "Faith, hope, love."

"Faith, hope, and love" is the simple summary of the Christian faith in three words. I'm going to unpack that for you in a second. Those are the affections of our heart. That's what should be going on inside of us. I love that Paul says, "I've not met you, but this is what I hear about your Christianity."

By the way, sometimes Paul will write a letter to people (like he does to the Colossians and to some other churches), and he goes, "Guys, I've never met you" or "I haven't seen you in a while, but I hear you're doing great." There are other times, like 1 Corinthians, where Paul writes and goes, "Guys, what is going on over there? I hear there's division and lack of unity and sexual immorality. You guys are doing things even the pagans don't do. What's going on?"

Here's my question for you. Again, just an honest moment for you to have before the Lord. How would people describe your Christian faith? If they took your family or you individually and said, "We've heard," would they say, "We've heard of your disciplined devotion to Christ" or "We've heard of your generous spirit" or "We've heard of how hospitable you are" or would they be like, "We've heard of your spotty attendance at church, your narcissism and unwillingness to serve, and your stingy giving"?

Paul says, "I've heard of your faith, of your hope, and of your love." Let's talk about those. Paul says, first, *faith*. Let's talk about faith. There are a lot of definitions for faith, but faith is the eyesight of the soul. You can almost think of faith as a sixth sense. You have five senses. Faith is your sixth sense. It's your ability to see the invisible world because you believe what God has said in his Word.

Here's another theological concept. Faith is called the *instrument of salvation*. Faith doesn't save us; Jesus saves us. Faith is the instrument that connects us to Christ. Everybody has faith, but not everybody has *biblical* faith. See, Paul says that biblical faith is two things: specific and public.

He says, "You have faith in Christ." People today have faith in humanity. I don't even know what that means, but people have that. Or people have faith in science, or people have faith in faith. Faith is not blind adherence. Faith is not what makes up for things not making sense. Faith is active trust in the personal work of Christ.

But it's not just specific; it's also to be public. He says, "We've heard of your faith." In other words, "It's obvious, and everyone knows you're a Christian." I don't have time to get into this, but I've told you before, and I really believe this... I had a conversation with

somebody about this this week. The longer you wait to make your faith public in any place or any people, the harder it gets.

I was in a conversation this week or last week with a guy who came to faith in Christ in our church. His life has really changed, but he's trying to figure out, "How do I tell all of my preexisting relationships about what God has done? I'm known as something completely different here, and it's going to change every relationship if I go public about this."

Then he says *love*. *Love* is a word we're very confused about. We're like, "We love our spouses. We love our kids. We love Taco Tuesdays." We use the word *love* very elastically. Love is being committed to another person's highest good. I'm not sure of the first person who came up with that definition, but I love that definition. Love is being committed to another person's highest good.

Love is not primarily a feeling. People talk about love like they can't help it. "I just fell in love." Like, I'm passive. It's like sentimentalism and romanticism. Or "I fell *out* of love." "Really? Okay. So this love thing... You're not in control of it at all. It just swoops over you and leaves you."

What's interesting here is Paul says, "The faith you have in Christ," and then he says, "The love you have for one another." Isn't that interesting? He doesn't say, "The love you have for the world," and we should love the world. He doesn't even say, "The love you have specifically for lost people," and we should love the lost. Paul loved the lost so much he started weeping in Romans 9 over his Jewish brothers and sisters who did not know Christ. He's talking about a specific love for the church.

Here's the thing. When you become a Christian, one of the affections God gives you... He gives you the gift of faith. You're like, "All of a sudden, I believe." The second thing he does is he gives you a love for Christians. I'm always wary of somebody who's like, "I have never been able to relate to Christians. All of my buddies are non-Christians." I'm like, "Do you think you sound cool saying that? Maybe you think that sounds like you're..."

We need to have people in our lives who are far from God and close to us, but... I can remember, when I became a Christian, Pine-Richland High School, 2001, end of my sophomore year, it was like, "I need some new friends now." All of a sudden, I was like, "Dude, I have so much in common. Every Christian and I have so much in common. One faith, one baptism, one Spirit. We have everything in common." You can't say, "I love Jesus, and I hate his bride" or "I love Jesus, and I hate his body."

Finally, *hope*. Hope is faith looking forward. He says, "You have a hope in heaven." Do you know what's interesting? No one reads books on heaven. I know the stories of when

someone dies and says they went to heaven and came back get popular, but a book on heaven... Guess what? No one reads it except for people who are afraid they're going to die and people who have loved ones who just died or are afraid they're going to die. They start reading books on heaven all of a sudden. Outside of that, we don't really think a lot about heaven.

I was driving in the car recently, and I was with my boys. This was a month or two ago. I'm not kidding you. They asked me, like, 10 questions in a row about heaven, and I couldn't answer any of them. I'm like, "I've not thought about it enough, guys. That's a really good question." Christ is not going to be first in our lives if we don't think more about the future, and I mean heaven and the fact that you and I and everybody in here have a face-to-face meeting with God in fewer than 100 years.

Christ must be first in our identity, first in our affections, and first in our *mission*. We'll do this one quickly, but let me show it to you. We talk about this all the time here, but let me show you this. I'm in verse 5. ***"Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel..."*** That's the message of the good news of what God has done for sinners in his Son Jesus Christ. It's the good news of the forgiveness of sins.

Verse 6: ***"...which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing..."*** Paul goes, "Guys, the gospel is going forward everywhere." Here's what's interesting about that. Paul is imprisoned, but he knows the gospel isn't. You know, Paul could get all sad. "Hey, guys. It's my prison guard and me. I'm trying to evangelize, but it's just him and me all day. I don't know if the gospel is going to make much progress."

Paul is like, "No, the gospel is active. It's alive. It's advancing." In fact, here's what he says. ***"...as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras..."*** He's the pastor and church planter for that church. ***"...our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit."*** By the way, you see that the gospel comes *to* people *through* people.

Paul says the gospel needs to be first in your identity, first in your affections, and first in your mission. Now, here's what I want us... I'm just asking us some questions today. What is the primary mission in your life? For Paul, it's obvious. You can just reread those verses.

Paul is like, "Here's my number one desire: I want people to meet Jesus and be made into his disciples. Out of that, I want a lot of new churches to be started so more people can be reached." I just want us to be honest. We don't have time for me to go to each of you and ask, "What's really your mission?"

Maybe some of you go, "That's it. That's what I'm most passionate about," but I think, for many of us... Let me tell you the secondary missions of our lives. These aren't necessarily bad in and of themselves. I think what has happened for a lot of people is a secondary mission has become the primary mission.

Let me give you the first one: career advancement. You know, you have to get into the best schools. You have to get the best internships. You have to get the best jobs. It's what we've called for decades the *American dream*, which has changed. Right after World War II, the American dream was "I just need one job. What my family needs is stability. I'll work at GE, and we'll have a small house, and I'll just have stability."

It was right after World War II, and that was the American dream: small house and stability. Then their kids, which were the Boomers... Their vision was "I kind of want what Mom and Dad had, but I want material prosperity. I want the bigger house and the bigger car and all that."

Now the new generation is saying they want all that, and they also want flexibility so eight weeks a year they can travel the world, or whatever, and they also want self-fulfillment in their jobs. What can happen is... Again, you need a career. You need to provide for your family. The Bible says if you don't work, you shouldn't eat. But for some of us, that becomes the number-one mission in our lives.

Another major mission for people that comes up instead of the mission of Christ is the project of the self. I mean, the health and wellness culture is out of control. The absolute obsession with health and wellness... Look. The Bible says there *is* a project of the self. It's called *sanctification*. Take your vitamins and your AG1 and whatever you guys do, but the project of the self (yes, be healthy) is to be the godliest version of yourself. It's to progressively and practically become more like Christ.

Here's the third one that becomes the mission of our lives: for our lives to be more comfortable. I think this particularly happens after midlife. It's like, "How do I set up my life so that there's ease and entertainment?" I mean, you can read the book of Ecclesiastes. Yes, God wants us to rest. God has given us gifts. But for some of us, the vision for our lives has shrunk to "I just want to be watching my favorite show by myself with nothing to do except look forward to my next vacation."

Paul says Christ should be first in our mission, first in our affections, first in our identities, and finally, first in our *prayers*. Let me show you this one. Verse 9: **"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you..."** This is the second time, by the way, that Paul tells them he's praying for them. Paul actually says, "I did not cease to pray for you."

This doesn't mean Paul only, always, continuously prayed. He had to sleep. He had to write letters. He got shipwrecked four different times. He had to make tents. Here's what Paul is saying: "I pray all the time. I'm always thinking about you guys." I think praying without ceasing means I'm always in a conversation with God that keeps getting interrupted, but I pick it back up. It means something like I have a spirit of dependency.

Now, here's what we're going to do with our little bit of time we have left. We're going to look at the content of Paul's prayers. By the way, if you want to dive deeper into this, Don Carson has a book called *Praying with Paul*. You'll find it on Amazon if you want it. It's a whole book where he takes almost all of Paul's prayers in the New Testament, and he outlines them and shows you what Paul prays for so that you could pray more effectively like Paul prayed.

Here's what's interesting. In all of Paul's prayers, there's not one physical need mentioned. And we're all about praying for it. We just had a prayer for healing last week. We're all about that, but here's what I want you to see: when Christ is first in your life, your prayers look different. Americans tend to pray for three things: health and healing, safety and protection, and for good things to happen and bad things not to happen. That's fine. Let's pray for more than that, not less than that.

Let me show you what Paul prays for. We'll pick it up in verse 9. He says, **"...asking that you may be filled..."** Paul goes, "I'm asking that you may be filled." What would people say you're full of? **"...asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding..."** I'm going to give you the three things Paul prays for, and I think these are the things we're going to pray for when Christ is first.

He prays, first and foremost, that they would know God's will and know God's Word. The will of God and the Word of God are the same. You can know a vast majority of God's will just by knowing God's Word. So, part of what we need to pray for people... You can pray that your son gets married, but how about you pray that he knows God's Word, because that solves so many of the...

What you really need is your son to lead himself, and you need him to know the Word of God better. You know, pray for all of the different secondary things, but at the end of the day, when you want to... "What do I want to pray for?" What should you pray for your kids for, for your spouse for? Pray that they would know the Word of God better.

Secondly, look at what he says. **"...so as to walk..."** "I want you to know the Word so you can walk." **"...so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God..."** He goes, basically, "I want you to know the Word of God, and then I want you to walk with God."

It's like, "What do I pray?" Pray that your... You know, whoever it is for you...yourself, first and foremost. "Lord, I pray that I know your Word and I actually walk with you in relationship." I love that idea. The idea of walking is the idea of relationship with God. It's the idea of obedience.

In fact, he says when you walk with the Lord, what ends up happening is you increase in spiritual knowledge, because there are certain things you can only learn by obeying. I think it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said, "Only he who truly obeys will understand." As soon as you start obeying, you go, "I thought I knew, but now I know."

He says, "I pray they would know the Word of God. I pray they would walk with God," and then look at verse 11. **"...being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy..."** The final thing he does is he prays that they would be warriors. It's not wrong to do this. We're always praying, "Lord, take this person out of this hard situation. Lord, get rid of this situation." Keep praying for that. That's good.

But Paul, along with praying that kind of stuff, basically says, "Lord, give them..." He gives them a bunch of attributes that we don't even like to talk about. "Give them patience." How often do you pray, "Lord, give me endurance"? "Lord, don't lessen the weight. Lord, broaden my shoulders." How often do you pray for what Jesus taught often? How often do you pray for perseverance?

Well, Paul prays these things for them, and then he prays the realities of the gospel over them. Look at verses 12-14. Paul begins and ends with gratefulness. He ends saying God has done three things. **"...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."**

Basically, Paul goes, "Let me just remind you one more time of who you are and whose you are." He says, "Listen. If you're going to put Christ first in your life, here's what you need to realize: you don't need to qualify yourself; Christ has already qualified you." Every other religion in the world says, "Do good works and do religious activity, and you'll be qualified before God. You'll be righteous before God. You'll be good before God." No. Actually, God in Christ has qualified us to be saints.

When you begin to realize all that Jesus Christ has done for you, you're going to go, "Man, he has to be first in my life." But it doesn't just say that he qualified you. That would be amazing. It says he delivered you out of the domain of darkness. Some of you maybe didn't even know you were in a domain of darkness.

It says he delivered you, which is another reminder that what Jesus did was he rescued you. Christianity is a rescue religion. You and I need to be saved from the domain of darkness, from the punishment of our sins, from the wrath of God. He says he delivered us, and then he says he transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.

So, part of our identity is not just that we are a new people. We're born again. We're made a new creation, but we're put in a new place. We're now under the kingdom of Christ. What does Jesus say about the kingdom of Christ? He says, "Seek first my kingdom and my righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

If you'll close your eyes and bow your head, I want to give you a chance to think about *who* you are and *whose* you are. Our identity in Christ is not achieved; it's received. At the end here, I want to remind you, just you right now before the Lord... I want to remind you of who you are.

You are valuable to God. We know this because God doesn't make junk. God created you and stamped on you the image of God. So, if you're here right now, and you feel like, "I am a mess-up," or somebody, your parents or an ex-somebody, told you that you're *not* something and you're defined by your failures... You're not your past. You're not the worst thing you've ever done. God says you're valuable.

In fact, God says, "You're so valuable, because I don't die for junk." You can tell how valuable something is by what somebody is willing to pay, and God said, "I'm willing to give my Son because you're that valuable." The Bible says that in Christ you are forgiven. If you're in Christ, you are forgiven. You're forgiven of your past. You're forgiven of everything you're going to do in the future. Live as a forgiven person.

The Bible says you're born again. You are not who you used to be. If you've come to Christ, you have a new relationship with Jesus Christ, and you have a new relationship with sin. It is no longer your master. You can tell it "No." The grace of God has appeared, training us to say "No." You are part of the body of Christ. Do not feel like you are alone in this church. You are part of the body of Christ. We're here with you. And you are a citizen of the kingdom of God. You're headed to heaven.

Lord, would you help us? Would we walk with a humble confidence, a humble confidence that knows we are in Christ, a confidence that we can boldly approach your throne because we're saints, a confidence in relating to one another because we're brothers and sisters in Christ. Lord, would you be first? Would you be first in our identity, our affections, our missions, and our prayers? In Jesus' name, amen.