

## Lesson 4 – Colossians 1:15-18

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### Review

The apostle Paul is writing a letter to the church at Colossae – a church he does not know and one that is facing heretical attacks on the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. This heresy combined ideas from various religions and philosophies with the truth of Christianity. Its elements included a need for a special knowledge available only to a select few, a denial of the deity and saving work of Jesus, the worship of angels, asceticism, and keeping Jewish ceremonial laws.

Paul greeted the church in his standard fashion (1:1-2), gave thanks for God's work in the church (1:3-8), and prayed for them (1:9-14). Paul's prayer was his first attack against the false teachers. They promised a special knowledge and superior spirituality. Terms like filled, knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual understanding were part of their vocabulary. So, he uses these same words in his prayer. Paul's prayer was that the Colossians be filled/controlled by the full knowledge of God's will, which would result in a worthy walk.

### Introduction

All the Scriptures testify to the person and work of Jesus Christ. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke records that Jesus “beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Jesus Himself stated that the Scriptures “bear witness of Me” (John 5:39). The OT presents God's plan to save the world from the Fall through His chosen people, His sovereign orchestration of history to bring about the coming of the Christ, and His plan for a dual coming – one in salvation from sin and one in judgement for sin. The NT presents the life and ministry of Christ, His work to spread the gospel and build His church, detailed theology of Christ's person and work given to His church, and the future plan for His church and the unbelieving world. It is all about Christ!

So, now Paul will counter the heretics with a presentation of the glorious “beloved Son” – His supreme person (1:15-18) and supreme work (1:19-23). He will directly attack the Colossian heresy that denied the deity of Jesus the Christ.

### The Supremacy of the Person of Christ (1:15-18)

#### 1. The Supremacy of the Person of Christ – His Relation to God (1:15)

<sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

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Jesus is the “image of the invisible God”. “Image” means “mirror-like representation”, exactly reflecting its source – “the invisible God”. Jesus is the exact likeness of God, a mirror image. He is God incarnate. Other passages detail this thought.

<sup>3</sup>And **He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature**, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, (Heb 1:3)

<sup>3</sup>And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, <sup>4</sup>in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, **who is the image of God.** (2 Cor 4:3-4)

<sup>18</sup>No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, **He has explained Him.** (John 1:18)

<sup>8</sup>Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, “Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? **He who has seen Me has seen the Father;** how *can* you say, ‘Show us the Father’? (John 14:8-9)

Jesus presents Himself as divine on many occasions.

- Jesus accepts the title of God. Thomas declared to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). Had Jesus in fact not been God, He would have been greatly remiss in allowing Thomas to stand uncorrected in assigning Him the name of God. If Jesus were not God, He should have done what Peter did in Acts 10:25-26 and distinguish Himself as only a man. Rather, Jesus confirms Thomas' words by accepting worship.
- Jesus accepts worship. Worship of any created thing is condemned in the Scripture (Rom 1:25). By accepting worship, Jesus separated Himself as the Creator and co-equal with God.

<sup>22</sup>For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, <sup>23</sup>so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. **He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.** (John 5:22-23)

<sup>9</sup>And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and **worshiped Him.** (Matt 28:9; see also passages like John 9:38)

- Jesus claimed to do what only God can do like forgive sin and raise the dead (John 5:25-29)

<sup>5</sup>And Jesus seeing their faith said to the paralytic, “**Son, your sins are forgiven.**”

<sup>6</sup>But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, <sup>7</sup>“Why does this man speak that way? **He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?**” (Mark 2:5-7)

- Jesus claims attributes that only belong to God. By ascribing these attributes to Himself, Jesus equated Himself with God: eternity (John 8:58; John 17:5), omnipresence (Matt 18:20; 28:20), omniscience (Matt 16:21; Luke 6:8; 11:17; John 4:29), and omnipotence (Matt 28:19-20; Mark 5:11-15; John 11:38-44).
- Jesus claims to be the great "I Am" (John 8:56-59). God declared Himself to be eternally pre-existing in the OT (Ex 3:14; Deut 32:39; Isa 41:4; 43:10). Jesus uses the same term claiming to also be eternally existing. Jesus does more than ascribe eternity to Himself, He assumes the name of God. In addition, clearly the Jews understood His claim.

<sup>56</sup>Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad.” <sup>57</sup>So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” <sup>58</sup>**Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.”** <sup>59</sup>**Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him,** but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple. (John 8:56-59)

– Jesus identifies Himself with God (John 10:30; 17:5).

<sup>5</sup>Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. (John 17:5)

<sup>30</sup>I and the Father are one.” <sup>31</sup>The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. <sup>32</sup>Jesus answered them, “I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?” <sup>33</sup>The Jews answered Him, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out *to be* God.” (John 10:30-33)

Jesus is one with God in essence. Thus, He is glorified with God (John 17:5) and this is why the Jews, understanding His claim, attempted to stone Him for making Himself out to be God (John 10:32). Jesus' words, "I and the Father are one" brings together the distinction of persons with the unity of being. "One" does not mean one in person for the word "one" is in the neuter form, not in the masculine. It speaks of essence.

Many other NT references explicitly call Jesus "God" or describe Him as God.

#### ❖ **Do you bow before Jesus as Lord God Almighty?**

Jesus is also “the firstborn of all creation”. “First-born” can mean first-born chronologically, but refers primarily to position or rank and emphasizes quality or kind, not time, with the idea of "preeminence". Clearly, this is the case here as the context indicates. Verse 16 says “all” things were created by Him; verse 17 says He is before all things, and verse 18 says He has first place in everything. Clearly, by word meaning and context, Paul is presenting Christ as preeminent.

In harmonizing other passages with Colossians 1:15, we see a clear representation of Christ as eternally existent God, not a created being.

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning **was** the Word, and the Word **was** with God, and the Word **was** God. <sup>2</sup>He **was** in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ... <sup>14</sup>And the Word **became** flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-3, 14)

In verses 1-3 of John 1, the “to be” verb “was” is in the imperfect tense which means having no beginning and no end. In verse 14, the aorist tense is used indicating an action at a specific point in time. The eternally existent Second Person of the Trinity became a man at point in time.

#### ❖ **Does Christ have preeminence in your life? What does that look like?**

## 2. The Supremacy of the Person of Christ – His Relation to Creation (1:16-17)

<sup>16</sup>For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. <sup>17</sup>He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

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<sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (ESV)

“For” is used in a causal sense. It introduces the argument for the preceding statement. Christ is preeminent in Creation, so now Paul explains how or why that is the case.

### a. Christ is preeminent because He is the Creator (1:16)

Christ is preeminent because He created all things. The Scriptures are clear that one of the activities of the pre-incarnate Christ is Creator.

**<sup>3</sup>All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. . . . <sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. (John 1:3, 10)**

<sup>5</sup>For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, <sup>6</sup>yet for us **there is *but* one God, the Father, from whom are all things** and we *exist* for Him; and **one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things**, and we *exist* through Him. (1 Cor 8:5-6)

<sup>1</sup>God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, <sup>2</sup>in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, **through whom also He made the world.** <sup>3</sup>And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, <sup>4</sup>having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they. (Heb 1:1-4)

Since God is Triune, how was each Person of the Godhead involved at creation? The one God exists eternally as three – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The very first hint of the plurality of Persons within the Godhead comes in the first verse of the Bible where the word for “God” is “Elohim” which is a plural word.

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning **God** created the heavens and the earth. (Gen 1:1)

In context, the plural name for God, Elohim, speaks of God's supremacy more than the Trinity. However, while the plural is for magnification it opens the door for plurality. The sense of plurality is further carried in the creation account in Genesis 1:26-27 with plural pronouns.

<sup>26</sup>Then **God** said, “Let **Us** make man in **Our** image, according to **Our** likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (Gen 1:26-27)

Many passages speak of creation being the work of God (Gen 1:1; Psa 96:5; Isa 37:16; 44:24; 45:12; Jer 10:11-12), while others attribute it specifically to the Father (Psa 102:25; 1 Cor 8:6), to the Son (Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:2, 1:10; John 1:1-3), or to the Holy Spirit (Gen 1:2; Job 26:13; 33:4; Psa 33:6; 104:30; Isa 40:12-13). All three Persons of the Trinity were involved in creation. This unique relationship within the Trinity is somewhat of a mystery. Perhaps it can be thought of that the Father decreed the work of creation, the Son did the work, and the Spirit energized the work.

Paul's point here is that the Son, Jesus the Christ, is THE Creator and therefore not created Himself and therefore He is supreme, preeminent.

Jesus created "all things". "All things" means without exception, the whole universe of things "were created". "Were created" speaks of a definite historical act of creating from nothing. Jesus created the "heavens" or those heavenly bodies separate from the earth and the "earth" itself. He created all those things visible (either to the naked eye in the heavens or in the physical realm) and invisible (those things which cannot be seen with the naked eye or in the spiritual realm). Paul makes it clear that all the invisible angels (thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities) were also created by Christ. This again attacks the Colossian heresy of angel worship (2:18).

Paul reiterates that all things "have been created" through Christ. "Have been created" is a tense that speaks of the permanence of the universe. The universe is still remaining as proof of Christ's creative power.

Paul used three prepositions in verse 16: "**by** Him", "**through** Him", and "**for** Him". "By" is literally "in" putting the sphere and center of creation at Christ. Creation is dependent on Christ. "Through" indicates that Christ was the builder. "For" indicates that the goal of creation is Christ. He is the preeminent One over all creation (1:15).

#### ❖ **Do you bow before the Lord your God, your Maker (Psa 95:6)?**

- b. Christ is preeminent because "He is before all things" (1:17a)

Not only is Christ preeminent because He is the Creator, but also because He existed before His creation. He is eternal. "He" is emphatic in the Greek meaning "He Himself" or "He and no other". "He is" is in the present tense and indicates that Christ is eternally existent. Jesus did not "came to be before all things," but "is continually before all things".

"Before" states the precedence of Christ in time and in place (rank) for He always existed before creation and thus has the preeminence as Creator. Jesus Christ is God!

- c. Christ is preeminent because "in Him all things hold together" (1:17b)

Not only is Christ preeminent because He is the Creator and because He is eternal, but also because He continually upholds and holds together His creation. He created the universe and He continually holds it all things together. He created the "natural" forces and processes that we see today. However, the cohesion of the universe is not due to those natural forces and processes set in motion at creation – everything depends upon Christ's continuous sustaining power. Jesus continually "upholds all things by the word of His power" (Heb 1:3).

One day that upholding, sustaining power will be removed and the result will be the destruction of the physical universe.

<sup>10</sup>But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which **the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.** <sup>11</sup>Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, <sup>12</sup>looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which **the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!** <sup>13</sup>But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. (2 Pet 3:10-13)

❖ **If the Creator of the universe continually upholds it with His powerful word, is there anything in your life too big for Him to handle with His powerful word?**

Paul's argument is that the beloved Son, Jesus the Christ is God and preeminent over creation. He must be preeminent because He made the universe; existed outside and before it; and upholds, sustains, and preserves it.

### 3. The Supremacy of the Person of Christ – His Relation to the Church (1:18)

<sup>18</sup>He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

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<sup>18</sup>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. (ESV)

Christ is preeminent over creation and also head of the body, the church.

The Scriptures provide numerous metaphors for the purpose of painting a rich picture of the church; to describe the nature of the church. A metaphor is a figure of speech that identifies something as being the same as some unrelated thing for rhetorical effect. It is a descriptive image to aid understanding. Some authors list anywhere from 40 to 100 metaphors or images of the church depending on how they are identified and counted. Some images represent the universal church, some individual believers within the church, and some can be seen as both. God has provided each of the metaphors to provide a full, rich picture of the church.

“Every biblical metaphor of the church, without exception, emphasizes its unity. The church is one bride with one husband; one flock with one shepherd; one set of branches on one vine; one kingdom with one king; one family with one father; one building with one foundation; one body with one head, ... (John MacArthur, *The Church: The Body of Christ*)

#### Family Metaphors

The church is pictured as God's family describing the church as a family unit with God as the father (Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10; 2 Cor 6:18; Matt 12:49-50; 1 Tim 5:1-2; James 2:14-16). This image demonstrates the love and care members of the church are to have for one another. It pictures unity, a bond, and strength of relationship.

❖ **Do you view fellow believers as siblings? How might this impact your relationships?**

The church is referred to as the bride of Christ. In Ephesians, Paul makes a comparison between the husband-wife relationship to that between Christ and the church and in 2 Corinthians when he calls the church a betrothed pure virgin (Eph 5:22-33; 2 Cor 11:2).

The stages in a Jewish wedding are instructional in understanding this picture where each stage corresponds to a piece of God's salvation plan.

- 1) The betrothal is where the father chooses and pays for the bride and the bride and groom are promised to one another (Eph 1:4; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 6:20; 2 Cor 11:2).
- 2) The groom returns to his father's house and prepares a dwelling for his wife (John 14:2 and see also Acts 1:11).
- 3) The groom fetches his bride and takes her to his father's house (John 14:3; 1 Thess 4:16-17).
- 4) The marriage takes place (Rev 19:7-8).
- 5) The marriage feast takes place (Rev 19:9).

This rich picture gives God's children images of God's sovereignty in salvation, Christ's amazing love His church, God's work and the bride's cooperation in maintaining faithfulness and purity until the Groom comes to take her away (the rapture), and the bride's expectant preparation for the Groom's imminent coming.

❖ **What are you doing to ensure faithfulness and purity until Christ comes for you? Are you looking forward to Christ's coming for you?**

#### Agricultural Images

The church is pictured as branches abiding in the true Vine (John 15:1-11). This image looks to the believer's union with Christ and the necessity of continually abiding in Christ in order to bear fruit (glorify God). The church is dependent on Christ's words.

❖ **Are you consistently abiding in Christ (walking in the Spirit)?**

The church is pictured as a flock of sheep (Acts 20:28; John 10:11-18; John 10:24-30; 1 Pet 2:24-25). This image pictures Christ's tender care, intimacy, security, and protection. Sheep are stupid animals – dependent, vulnerable, and prone to wandering. The Shepherd feeds, protects, and leads His sheep.

❖ **How might this image impact those that lead local churches? How might this image impact your dependence on the Shepherd and Guardian of your soul?**

#### Building or Temple Images

The church is pictured as a building or temple (1 Cor 3:9-11; 1 Pet 2:4-5; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Cor 3:16). This image pictures the church as a place where God dwells. As a building, the church is being built with Christ as the Cornerstone and the apostles and NT prophets as the foundation (i.e. the Word is the foundation).

❖ **How might this image impact your thinking about involvement in disciple making? How might this image impact what local bodies use as foundations?**

The church is also pictured as a priesthood (Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 20:6; 1 Pet 2:4-5, 9-10; Rom 12:1). This image pictures the church as those who have access to God through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. It also pictures the church as ones who bring spiritual sacrifices to God.

❖ **Do you regularly avail yourself of moment-by-moment access to God? Do you live your life as you are a holy sacrifice to God?**

### The Body of Christ

The church is expressed metaphorically as a “body” in several NT passages. This is perhaps the best known of the metaphors. The universal church is not an organization, but an organized, living organism. The body figure illustrates the diverse-unity and interdependence and care for and service toward one another (1 Cor 12:12-26) that is present in the church. The body is made up of unique individuals who are united by their union with Christ (Rom 12:4-5; Eph 4:1-16) and the indwelling Holy Spirit. The many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another with Christ as the head (Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:18) and the nourisher of the church (Eph 5:23, 28-30; Col 2:18-9).

❖ **How might this image impact your own pride/humility, your view of other believers, and your attitude toward each member of the body?**

a. Christ is preeminent because He is head of the body, the church (1:18a)

“He” is emphatic with the idea that “He and no other is continually”. Paul emphasizes that Christ and no other is the “head” of the church. “Head” is literally the physical head of people. Since the loss of the head destroys life, this word is used in phrases relating to capital and extreme punishment. Metaphorically, the word is used of source or origin as well as ruler or head of some thing or organization.

As the head, Christ is the source, origin, and leader of His body, the church. “Head” combines the thought of supremacy with that of the origination and conveyance of life and energy. The body functions in unity (with the fruits of the Spirit – Gal 5:23) as the life of Christ flows through its members (Gal 2:20). Christ leads His body through the Holy Spirit which He sent from the Father (John 15:26). Christ leads His body through His inerrant Word (Col 3:16).

❖ **Do you see unity in your body relationships? Do you go to the Word to see how Christ will lead His church?**

b. Christ is preeminent because He is source of the church (1:18a)

“Beginning” refers to the commencement of something as an action, process, or state of being. Christ started the church. He is the one who is building His church (Matt 16:18). “He is” is in the present tense meaning He is continually the commencement of the state of being of the Church. The Church derives its source from Christ.



c. Christ is preeminent because He is the resurrected One (1:18b)

Christ is the “firstborn from the dead”. “Firstborn” is the same word used in 1:15. It can mean first-born chronologically, but refers primarily to position or rank and emphasizes quality or kind, not time, with the idea of “preeminence”. Here it means both.

There are nine resurrections recorded in the Scriptures:

- Elijah raising the widow’s son (1 Kings 17:17-24).
- Elisha raising the Shunamite woman’s son (2 Kings 4:18-37).
- Man raised after touching Elisha’s dead body (2 Kings 13:20-21).
- Jesus raises the widow of Nain’s son (Luke 7:11-17).
- Jesus raises Jairus’ daughter (Luke 8:52-56).
- Jesus raises Lazarus (John 11).
- Many saints who had died were raised at the death of Jesus (Matt 27:50-53)
- Peter raised Tabitha (Acts 9:36-43).
- Paul raised Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12).

Each of these people died again physically. Christ is the first to rise in an incorruptible, glorified body. He is first, supreme, preeminent because of this.

Concerning the resurrection of Christ, the Scriptures present the proofs of the resurrection beginning with the empty tomb and ending with the dramatic change in the disciples. The resurrection is so important that Paul states, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:17). The Scriptures also teach the doctrinal significance of the resurrection.

- 1) It validates the identity of Jesus the Christ as the Son of God (Rom 1:4) confirming the truth of all He taught (Matt 28:6).
- 2) It validates Christ’s atoning work ensuring the believer’s regeneration (Rom 6:4; 1 Pet 1:3-4) and justification (Rom 4:23-25). In the resurrection, the Father accepts the perfect sacrifice for our sins, declaring us righteous. There was no penalty left to pay for sin, no more wrath of God to bear, no more guilt to punishment – all has been completely paid for and no guilt remains.
- 3) It makes certain the resurrection of all (1 Cor 15:20-22) and coming judgement (Acts 17:31).
- 4) It ensures the believer’s union with Christ which provides the power to live in a way that glorifies God (Rom 6:5-7; Phil 3:8-11; Gal 2:20).

Paul summarizes the theme of the previous entire section (v15-18) for emphasis: “so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.” Christ is preeminent in creation and preeminent in the church. He is preeminent in everything! He is supreme over the visible world, the invisible world, and the church. He ranks first, is the source, and sustainer of all. He is Lord! One day every person who has ever lived will confess that Jesus is Lord – either Lord and Savior or Lord and Judge.

<sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:10-11)

❖ **Does Christ have first place in your life? Does He reign supreme in you?**

## **Conclusion**

The Spirit through Paul continues the attack against the false Colossian teachers. They rejected the deity of Jesus the Christ so Paul goes after that with clear teaching. Jesus is God incarnate. He is the “image of the invisible God”. He is the preeminent one over all creation. He is the Creator of the physical as well as the immaterial universe. He is eternal. He holds the universe together by His omnipotent power. He is the origin and source of the body, the church. Finally, He is the preeminent one who is the first One resurrected with a glorified body. He is first; He is supreme; He is preeminent. Does He reign supreme in your life?!

## **Additional Study**

1. Think through how your days normally go. Does your attitude and reactions demonstrate that Christ reign is supreme in your life? In what ways can His reigning be demonstrated more fully?
2. Read Jesus’ eight “I am” passages in John: the great “I am” (John 8:31-59); the bread of life (John 6:26-58); the light of the world (8:12-20); the door of the sheep (10:1-10); the good shepherd (10:11-21); the resurrection and the life (11:1-45); the way, the truth, and the life (14:1-15); and the true vine (15:1-11). How do these describe Christ’s person and work?
3. Christ is the preeminent One. Yet there are times when believers place other things as preeminent in their life. Have you done that? If so, what do you need to do? (hint... repent)
4. If Christ is preeminent, then we need no other resources for life and godliness, have you looked elsewhere for those resources? If so, what do you need to do? (hint... return to only Christ)