

“Christ Alone”

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Let me state an obvious truth: Christianity stands or falls with Jesus Christ. The whole definition and shape of Christianity begins and ends with Jesus. A distorted understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done produces a distorted Christianity. And a distorted Christianity is like fool’s gold: it’s worthless. Anything less than the real Jesus is an imaginary Jesus, and an imaginary Jesus can’t save us from condemnation or grant us eternal life.

Today, we continue our series on the Protestant Reformation by looking at the principle “Christ Alone.” “Christ Alone” means that Jesus is unique. He is the unique, one of a kind Son of God. He is the only God-man. He is the only mediator between God and sinful human beings. His death on the cross is the only sacrifice needed to pay for sins. His righteous life is the only righteousness that perfectly meets God’s standards and fulfills God’s intent for human beings. There is no other way to know God truly and be reconciled to him except through Jesus, because there is no one like Jesus and there is no one who has done what Jesus has done.

Martin Luther, the great trailblazer of the Reformation, came to this position in 1518: “I teach that people should put their trust in nothing but Jesus Christ alone, not in their prayers, merits, or their own good deeds.”¹ Luther was a Catholic monk, priest, and professor who protested the views of the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church taught—and teaches today—that God’s grace is mediated through the Church, and it comes down from God, through Christ, by the Spirit, and also by means of saints, the Pope, cardinals, bishops, priests, and sacraments, such as baptism, the eucharist, and penance.

I don’t want to get bogged down in talking about Roman Catholic Theology this morning, but the fact is that though they have the same views on the person or identity of Jesus, their teachings seem to undermine his uniqueness and the sufficiency of his work. According to the Bible, Jesus is the only sinless human being who has ever lived (Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5; cf. Rom. 3:9–20, 23). According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Mary benefited first of all and uniquely from Christ’s victory over sin: she was preserved from all stain

¹ Martin Luther, “Letter to Johann von Staupitz (March 31, 1518),” in *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1930–83), 1:160, quoted in Stephen Wellum, *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 163,

of original sin and by a special grace of God committed no sin of any kind during her whole earthly life.”² None of that is found or even suggested in the Bible. In fact, Mary recognized that she needed a Savior (Luke 1:47).

While the Bible recognizes that “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5),³ the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that Mary is also a mediator. This is what it says:

This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfilment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation.... Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.⁴

There are a number of problems with this statement, but the ones that are greatest come at the end. We’re told she has a “saving office” and that her intercession “bring[s] us the gifts of eternal salvation.” This is completely unbiblical. Only God saves. According to the Bible, God the Father predestined us and sent God the Son to save us; God the Son added a second nature of humanity, lived the perfect life, died on a cross to pay for our sins, and rose from the grave; and God the Spirit applies the benefits of Jesus’ work to us. Yes, God chooses to use sinful human beings to preach the gospel and to pray for us, but he doesn’t need to use them. He chooses to, but he doesn’t rely on them. And they aren’t sinless, nor do they have a “saving office.”

What bothers me most about that statement regarding Mary is that she is given titles that belong only to God. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are called advocates or helpers (1 John 2:1; John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).⁵ And Jesus is the only mediator (1 Tim. 2:5). So, I view the Church’s statements about Mary to be blasphemous.

In Catholic theology, the Church is the body of Christ in a very real, and not merely metaphorical, way. Therefore, salvation is mediated through the Church and through the

² Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §411, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 104.

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁴ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §969, pg. 252. This quote comes from *Lumen Gentium*, one of the principal documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). It was promulgated by Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964.

⁵ The same Greek word is translated as “advocate,” “helper,” or “counselor” in various translations. The Greek word is παράκλητος.

sacraments. Furthermore, sin must be atoned for not just by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, but also through sacraments and in purgatory. Again, this is against Scripture, which tells us that Jesus finished his atoning work on the cross (John 19:30). We cannot add to Jesus' perfect work on our behalf. To even suggest that is to undermine his work.

Though we are surrounded by Roman Catholics today, Catholic theology is not the only threat to a true understanding of Jesus and his work. We are also surrounded by many fictional Jesuses, such as the Jesus who never excluded anyone or who never judged and the Jesus who is merely a man, whether a prophet, a good man, a spiritual guru, or all of the above. Many people believe that Jesus is not the one-and-only Son of God and the one-and-only way to God. Therefore, we need to uphold "Christ Alone" today, too.

This morning, I want to focus on three things. First, I want us to see who Jesus is. Second, I want us to see what he did for us. And, third, I want us to see how we should find our identity in him. He alone is the one in whom all things hold together. He alone is truly God and truly man. He alone is the one who died for our sins. And he alone is our true identity.

I won't be able to say everything about Jesus this morning, of course. If you want to know more about Jesus, go to <https://wbcommunity.org/jesus>. But to see the uniqueness of Jesus, I want us to turn to the book of Colossians.

First, we'll look at a very important passage in the first chapter. We'll read verses 15–20. And as we're turning there, I want to read the two verses before that passage. The apostle Paul writes this to Christians:

¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

I'll come back to the idea of how God rescues his people through his Son. But it's important to understand that we are rescued by the Son. Now, Paul tells us more about who the Son is in verses 15–20:

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.

Let's take this passage bit by bit. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. He represents God, whom we can't see, perfectly. The book of Hebrews says, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). This is important for understanding Jesus' divinity and his humanity. If we fail to see that Jesus is both God and man, we'll get Jesus wrong. I'll explain that in just a moment. But it's important to see here that Jesus is the perfect image of God. Not only that, but in him "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." That can only be true of God. No mere human being could contain the fullness of God.

We're also told that Jesus is "the firstborn of all creation." In the fourth century, Arians took this verse to mean that Jesus was the first created being. Today, Jehovah's Witnesses would read this passage in a similar way. But here "firstborn" refers to rights and status. We know this from another passage in the Bible. In Psalm 89, which is a Psalm largely about David, God says this:

And I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth (Ps. 89:27).

David was not the first king of Israel. That was Saul. And David was not the firstborn of his family. He was the youngest of eight brothers. So, "firstborn" does not literally mean "born first" here. It refers to his unique position. In the Bible, there are times when Israel or the king was said to be God's "son." Jesus is truly God's Son, the "highest king."

We know from other passages in the Bible that Jesus is God. Sometimes, Jesus is quite simply called God (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:1). Sometimes, passages that in the Old Testament clearly refer to God are quoted (or alluded to) in the New Testament and applied to Jesus.⁶ Other times, Jesus is described as doing the same work as God. Only God can forgive sins, judge people, and create the world. And yet we're told that Jesus does these things. So, in this passage in Colossians, we're told that Jesus created all things, and not just all

⁶ For example, see the "I am" statements of Jesus such as John 8:24, 58, which refer to passages in the Old Testament (Isa. 41:4; 43:10, 13, 25; 46:4; 48:12). See John 12:36-43, in which John quotes Isaiah 6:10 and says that Isaiah saw "him" who, in the context of the passage in John, is clearly Jesus. In Isaiah 6, the prophet has a vision of God. See also Philippians 2:9-11, which is about Jesus and alludes to Isaiah 45:23, which is clearly about God.

physical things in the universe, but all created realities, whether angels or people or anything else. If that is true, he cannot be a created being (or else he would have created himself).

And not only that, all things are created by Jesus and for him. Romans 11:36 says, “For from him and through him and to him are all things.” There, the apostle Paul says everything exists for, through, and to God. Here, in Colossians, we’re told that everything exists by Jesus and for him, and that he sustains everything, holding it all together. This cannot be possible unless Jesus is God.

Jesus is the center of reality. He holds everything together. Hebrews says he does that by his word (Heb. 1:3). He holds the universe together. Without Jesus, there would be no creation. Everything would cease to exist. *You* would cease to exist without Jesus, whether you trust him or not. And he is the one who connects God to human beings. He is the point where heaven and earth meet. That is why he alone is the one who connects us to God and why he alone is the head of the church.

Earlier, I said that it’s important to know that Jesus is God. If he were not God, he would not have the power to save us, nor would we have lived the perfectly righteous life. I also said that he is human. When he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb, though he has always existed, he added a second nature. He was and is still God, but he also became a human being. As a human being, he fulfills God’s plans for humanity and he can be our representative and our substitutionary, atoning sacrifice for our sins.

When Jesus is called the “image of God,” it reminds us that humans were created in God’s image. The first human beings were created to reflect God’s character, to represent him on earth, to rule over the world, and to multiply so that the world would become full of God’s image bearers, who would also reflect his glory and rule the world. But humans can only carry this mandate out if they come under God’s rule by obeying God’s word. Yet, from the beginning, humans haven’t trusted God. They haven’t paid attention to his word. They have disobeyed him and lived contrary to his design for our lives.

Because we ignore God and rebel against him, we deserve condemnation. Yet God has always had a plan to save people. At the right time, he sent his Son into the world. Jesus truly reflected, represented, and obeyed God. He always loved God perfectly. Therefore, he fulfills God’s expectations for us. He is truly the perfect man. And yet he died for our sins, paying the penalty for our crimes against God.

We'll talk about that more in a moment. But it's important to know that Jesus died, because this passage says that he is "the firstborn of the dead." In this case, Jesus literally was the first resurrected person in history. He was the person to die and come back to life in a body that can never die again.⁷ He is the "firstfruits" (1 Cor. 15:20, 23) of the resurrection. That means he is the first resurrected person, but others will follow later. When Jesus rose from the grave, his immortal body was like a down payment, guaranteeing that at the end of time, when Jesus returns, all of God's people will be resurrected and live in a perfect, resurrected world. At that time, all things will be reconciled to Jesus. This doesn't mean that every person will be reconciled to God in terms of salvation. We know from many other passages in the Bible that there will be people who are condemned, who continue to reject God and want no part with him. But it means that everything in the universe will be reordered to reflect God's reign. Those who trust in Jesus will live with him in a perfected universe, a universe of peace and harmony. Those who reject Jesus will be removed from this universe, cast out into what we call hell.⁸

So, we have already seen in one passage that Jesus is both God and man, that he created the universe and sustains it, and that he is the head of the church who was raised from the dead.

In Colossians 2, we're told more about Jesus' work as our Savior. Let's read verses 6–15:

⁶Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having 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. ¹³And 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, ¹⁴by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside,

⁷ Others died and came back to life only to die again later. Technically, that is revivification, not resurrection.

⁸ Some people take this verse out of context and believe it teaches universalism, the idea that everyone will be saved from condemnation. But Paul says that those who continue in the faith are reconciled to God through Christ (Col. 1:21–23). Also, God "disarmed rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, triumphing over them in him" when Jesus died on the cross (Col. 2:15). We know from the rest of the Bible that such evil spiritual rulers such as Satan will not be reconciled in a saving way to Jesus.

nauling it to the cross. ¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Notice that in verse 9, we're told that "the whole fullness of deity" dwells in Jesus. This cannot be said of a mere human being. And Christians have access to the fullness of God because they are "in Christ," which means they are united to him and their lives are subsumed or submerged in him.

But what I want to focus on is what Paul says about what Jesus does for us. He says that Jesus gives us a spiritual circumcision. This may seem very strange to you if you're not familiar with the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were told to circumcise male children. Literally, this involved cutting out part of a man's flesh. But even in the Old Testament, this was a sign. It pointed forward to the Messiah, who would come out of Israel. And it symbolized the need to have one's old nature cut out, to have a spiritual change. We might use the metaphor of a heart transplant.⁹

In this passage, we're told that Christians have received a circumcision "made without hands." That's another way of saying that God has done it. And we're told this is done "by putting off the body of the flesh." In the New Testament, "flesh" doesn't literally mean one's body. The physical stuff of the world is not inferior to spiritual things. But "flesh" often means sinful desires. We're supposed to put those away. When God brings us to faith in Jesus, we receive new desires and a new nature.

This change occurs because, when we're united to Jesus by trusting in him, our old selves are buried with him and our new lives are resurrected in him. That's what that spiritual circumcision really is, and that is what is pictured in baptism. It's a change of condition, a change of status, and a change of our spiritual lives. When we have a right relationship with Jesus, it is as though we have already died, and we have already been raised to new life, because he has died for our sins and been resurrected for our justification. If we believe that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and has done what the Bible says he has done, then we receive whatever is his. We are credited with his perfect, righteous life. Though we will die, we will receive immortal, resurrected bodies.

How is this possible? Because God has forgiven us. And how can God forgive people who have sinned against him? God cancelled "the record of debt that stood against us with its

⁹ See Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25–26.

legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” God is a perfect judge. He makes sure that every crime is punished. For those who trust in Jesus, all their sins were nailed to the cross. Jesus has already died for them. All our spiritual debt has been set aside, paid for by Jesus’ once-and-for-all sacrifice (Heb. 7:27; 9:26; 10:10, 12, 14). We do not have to pay for our own sins, because they have been paid for—if we trust Jesus.

I want us to look at one more passage from Colossians to see that not only is Jesus the God-man who was crucified for our sins, but he is also our identity, our very life. Let’s look at Colossians 3:1–4:

¹ 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. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

If we have been raised with Christ, or made spiritually alive in him because we have faith in him, we’re supposed to seek “the things that are above.” That means we’re supposed to seek after eternal matters, the things of God. That doesn’t mean the things of this world aren’t important. But it does mean they need to be put in their proper place. They are not the center of the universe. Jesus is.

Paul tells Christians that they “have died” and their “life is hidden with Christ in God.” Then, he says, “When Christ *who is your life* appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” Jesus is our true life. He is supposed to be our true identity. Our true selves haven’t even appeared yet. We won’t know who we’re truly supposed to be until we know Jesus and until we see him face to face (1 John 3:2). This means that our lives are supposed to be built around Jesus. He isn’t a little something that we add onto our lives. Following Jesus isn’t a hobby. Trusting in Jesus is a life-consuming reality. If we know Jesus truly, our lives are swallowed up in his life. We find our true selves by finding him.

What do these passages in Colossians mean for us? How do these truths affect our lives?

First, Jesus alone is the God-man, the one who holds the universe together, the one who connects us to God. There is simply no one like him. Christianity says that there is one God who exists in three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Yet Jesus is unique, because he is both God and man and we need him to be both. Only a human being could die in place of other human beings, and Jesus died for our sins. Only a divine human being can live a perfect, holy

human life, satisfying God's standards for humanity. Only an infinite God could pay for the sins of a multitude of people. There is simply no other way to satisfy God's perfect, holy, righteous demands for justice than Jesus' righteous life and atoning death. He is the only bridge between God and man. As Jesus himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

I realize that many people find this offensive. They think that any claim that one religion is true is too exclusive. They think it's narrow-minded and bigoted to say that Jesus is the only way to God, the only way to eternal life.

I understand that. But, in the end, all truth claims tend to be narrow, exclusive, and specific. If I say that two plus two is four is true, I'm excluding other claims, such as "two plus two is five," or "two plus two is three." All mathematical truths are very narrow that way. Scientific truths and historical truths are narrow and specific. Why shouldn't that be the case when it comes to God?

Furthermore, different religions have different views of Jesus, and they can't all be true. Islam says that Jesus is not God's Son, that he is not divine, that he didn't die on the cross and therefore that he didn't rise from the grave. This and the biblical view of Jesus both can't be true. Jesus can't be the biblical Jesus, the Muslim Jesus, the Mormon Jesus, and the New Age Jesus, because these different "Jesuses" have contradictory descriptions. Different religions say contradictory things about God and salvation. They could all be false, but they can't all be true.

And when it comes to exclusivity, we sometimes need to go through one channel. This may seem like an odd illustration, but I think it works. I have an iPhone and an iPad. When I use these devices, I use "apps" that I downloaded from Apple's "App Store." To get a new app on these devices, I must go to that store. There's no other way. And if you develop an app and want it to be used by Apple's customers, you have to go through Apple. Apple decides whether your app will be available on the App Store. They want to make sure the apps are not inappropriate or have viruses. So, both customers and app developers need to go through one channel. To get our church's sermons on iTunes so they can be listened to on Apple's podcasting app, I had to go through Apple. There was no other way.

Sometimes, there is only one path. There is only one God who created the universe and sustains it even now. There is only one God who became a human being without ceasing to be God. There is one God-man who died for our sins. There is simply no one else.

Here's a second thing I want us to consider: Jesus' work is perfect. He is the true image of God. He lived a perfect human life imaging God: reflecting him, representing him, obeying him, loving him. And he died a once-for-all death to pay for our sins. There is nothing we can do to add to Jesus' work. All our efforts are small and tainted with imperfections and bad motives, such as selfishness. So, it's not "Jesus plus works," or "Jesus plus anything else." It is "Christ Alone."

When we took questions from people a couple of months ago at West Bridgewater's Park Day, someone asked, "Will Mary save me?" The answer is no. Neither will Allah, Buddha, Vishnu, Zeus, any president, any athlete, any entertainer, any scientist, your spouse, or even you. Only Jesus saves.

Only Jesus goes between God and us. That means we can go directly to him and put our faith in him. You don't need to talk to me before putting faith in Jesus and being forgiven for your sins. You don't have to confess your sins to me or even be baptized. Salvation can be yours today if you trust Jesus. That doesn't mean the church isn't important. No, I think the church is very important. I play an important role as a pastor and teacher. Other people play important roles in the church. The church helps us in many ways, such as encouraging us, discipling us, correcting us, teaching us, loving us, and so on. But you don't need to go through a whole list of intermediaries to get to God. Because of Jesus, we can directly approach God in prayer (Heb. 4:14–16). He alone is our High Priest.

Here's the third thing I want us to see: To have a right relationship with Jesus, we need to have faith in him. If Jesus is the only God-man who lives the perfect life for us and dies for us, and if he is the only High Priest and the only mediator between God and man, then it makes sense that he is the only proper object of our faith. Of course, we believe in God the Father and God the Spirit, too. But we can have no part with them if we don't believe in Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to believe in the triune God. Colossians 2:12 says that we are raised to new life "through faith in the powerful working of God." You can't trust in the powerful working of God without trusting that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and that he did what the Bible says he is. Faith is personal. It is trust in a person's character and abilities. Salvation from sin and condemnation cannot be achieved apart from trusting Jesus and being united to him by means of the Holy Spirit. I think it's impossible to be saved apart from knowing who Jesus is and what he has done for us. As I said last week, the Bible uses the metaphor of marriage to depict our relationship to

Jesus. We are his bride and he is our groom. It's impossible to be married to someone you don't know.¹⁰

Here's the fourth and final thing I want us to see: Jesus alone is our true identity. He is our life. He is what matters. Our lives often feel disappointing. We may feel like giant failures, because we haven't measured up to our own expectations, let alone God's standards. In those times, we must understand that Jesus is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). We may feel like we've been rejected by people who should love us. We may not feel loved at all. Yet we know that Jesus loves us because he died for us. We may feel that our lives are falling apart and that we have no security in this world, no guarantee that things will work out. Yet Jesus holds all things together. He has the power to hold your life together. And he is the first installment of the resurrected, perfected new creation. If you trust in him, though the worst in this life happens to you, you already have eternal life and you will have resurrected life with him.

In the church I used to serve, there was a man who often talked about his worry that he would never get married. You don't hear many men talk like that, so it was memorable. He did get married around age 30, but before that time he was worried that he might remain single for the rest of his life. I guess he had those feelings because his parents married when they were young, and they modeled a healthy, loving relationship. So, marriage for him was what a great career might be for other people, a very desirable achievement. When he was wondering if he would ever get married, he asked himself this question: "If I never get married, is Jesus enough?" In other words, would Jesus be enough to satisfy him, to give his life meaning and happiness?

That's a question we should all ask ourselves. Is Jesus enough if I never get rich? Is Jesus enough if I'm never famous or powerful? Is Jesus enough if I never do what all my friends are doing? Is Jesus enough if I feel like my friends and family don't love me the way that they should? And the answer must be, "Yes." Jesus is enough because he is God, because he holds the universe together, because he is our life. Jesus is enough because he is perfect and because he loves us and sacrificed himself for us. Your spouse will never love you the way Jesus does and he or she can't die for your sins. Your career or money will never be able to give you the riches that Jesus can give you in eternity, because he made everything. Your hobbies and possessions can never quench your spiritual thirst or satisfy your spiritual hunger. You were made for more

¹⁰ For more on faith in Christ, see the previous week's sermon, "Faith Alone," at <https://wbcommunity.org/faithalone>.

than the creation. You were made for the Creator. Christ alone can save us. Christ alone can truly satisfy us. Let us trust him and find our true lives in him.